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History and the Supernatural in Medieval England

C. S. Watkins

HISTORY AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

This is a fascinating study of religious culture in England from 1050 to 1250. Drawing on the wealth of material about religious belief and practice that survives in the chronicles, Carl Watkins explores accounts of signs, prophecies, astrology, magic, beliefs about death and the miraculous and demonic. He challenges some of the prevailing assumptions about religious belief, questioning in particular the attachment of many historians to terms such as 'clerical' and 'lay', 'popular' and 'elite', 'Christian' and 'pagan' as explanatory categories. The evidence of the chronicles is also set in its broader context through explorations of miracle collections, penitential manuals, *exempla* and sermons. The book traces shifts in the way the supernatural was conceptualised by learned writers and the ways in which broader patterns of belief evolved during this period. This original account sheds important new light on belief during a period in which the religious landscape was transformed.

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C. S. WATKINS



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For my mother and in memory of my father

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PREFACE

More debts have been accumulated before and during the (rather too many) years of this book's preparation for justice to be done to them in a short preface, but a number stand out for special mention. The first are to those who interested me in medieval history when I came up to Cambridge as an undergraduate: Christine Carpenter, Rosamond McKitterick and Sandra Raban. More recently, I have profited greatly from the wise advice of many scholars, especially Valerie Flint, Jonathan Riley-Smith and Miri Rubin. Magdalene College, where this book was begun during a research fellowship and where I have finally finished it as a teaching fellow, has proved the most congenial of environments in which to think and work. Special mention must be made of my immediate colleagues at Magdalene, Eamon Duffy, who kindly read and commented on sections of the book in early drafts, and Tim Harper, for the help they have rendered over the years. Seminars in Norwich, London, Bristol and Aberystwyth have offered further indispensable opportunities to test ideas, expose false assumptions and absorb invaluable advice. The manuscript of the book has benefited from the sharp eyes of a number of readers. My former research student Tom Licence bravely read the whole and saved me from many errors and infelicities. It hardly needs to be said that the remaining deficiencies of substance and style are the work of the author alone. Two final and very substantial debts remain to be acknowledged. The first is proclaimed by the dedication; the other is to Dr Martin Brett, who supervised the PhD dissertation on which this book is based and commented on drafts as it developed. What follows has been too long in the making but it would scarcely have been begun without his unfailing and patient guidance.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Chapter 5 of this book draws on material which first appeared in ‘Sin, Penance and Purgatory in the Anglo-Norman Realm: the Evidence of Visions and Ghost Stories’, *Past and Present*, 175 (2002), 3–33. This chapter represents further reflection on, and expansion of, these ideas.

In the case of Nelson Medieval Texts and Oxford Medieval Texts, translations used here are those of the editors unless otherwise specified in footnotes.

ABBREVIATIONS

AE	Adam of Eynsham, <i>Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis, The Life of St Hugh of Lincoln</i> , ed. and trans. D. L. Douie and H. Farmer, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1961–2).
<i>Becket Materials</i>	<i>Materials for the History of Archbishop Thomas Becket</i> , ed. J. C. Robertson, 7 vols. (RS, 1875–85).
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
DNB	<i>New Dictionary of National Biography</i>
GT	Gervase of Tilbury, <i>Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor</i> , ed. and trans. S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 2002).
GW, DK	Gerald of Wales, <i>Descriptio Kambriae, Giraldi Cambrensis Opera</i> , vi, ed. J. F. Dimock (RS, 1868), 153–227.
GW, EH	Gerald of Wales, <i>Expugnatio Hibernica, Giraldi Cambrensis Opera</i> , v, ed. J. F. Dimock (RS 1867), 205–411.
GW, IK	Gerald of Wales, <i>Itinerarium Kambriae, Giraldi Cambrensis Opera</i> , vi, ed. J. F. Dimock (RS, 1868), 1–152.
GW, TH	Gerald of Wales, <i>Topographia Hibernica, Giraldi Cambrensis Opera</i> , v, ed. J. F. Dimock (RS, 1867), 1–204.
HH	Henry of Huntingdon, <i>Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, Historia Anglorum, The History of the English People</i> , ed. and trans. D. Greenway (Oxford, 1996).
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i> .
JS, Pol.	John of Salisbury, <i>Ioannis Sacresberiensis Episcopi Carnotensis Policratici: sive de nugis curialium et vestigiis philosophorum libri III</i> , ed. C. C. J. Webb, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1909).
JW	<i>The Chronicle of John of Worcester</i> , ed. R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. J. Bray and P. McGurk, 3 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1995–8).
<i>Lanercost Chronicle</i>	<i>Chronicon de Lanercost 1201–1336</i> , ed. J. Stevenson (Edinburgh, 1839).

List of abbreviations

Layamon	<i>Layamon's Brut: or Chronicle of Britain, a poetical semi-Saxon paraphrase of the Brut of Wace, now first published from the Cottonian manuscripts in the British Museum, accompanied by a literal translation, notes and a grammatical glossary</i> , ed. F. Madden (London, 1847).
Map	Walter Map, <i>De Nugis Curialium, The Courtiers' Trifles</i> , ed. and trans. M. R. James, ed. and revised R. A. B. Mynors and C. N. L. Brooke (Oxford, 1983).
Melrose Chronicle	<i>The Chronicle of Melrose AD 735–1270: from the Cottonian Manuscript, Faustina B. ix in the British Museum</i> , ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (London, 1936).
OV	Orderic Vitalis, <i>The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis</i> , ed. M. Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80).
Peterborough Chronicle	<i>The Peterborough Chronicle</i> , trans. H. A. Rositzke (New York, 1951).
PL	<i>Patrologia cursus completus, series Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–61).
RC	Ralph of Coggeshall, <i>Radulphi de Coggeshall Chronicon Anglicanum</i> , ed. J. Stevenson (RS, 1875).
RD	Richard of Devizes, <i>Chronicon Richardi Diuensis de Tempore Regis Ricardi Primi, The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes of the Time of King Richard the First</i> , ed. and trans. J. T. Appleby (London, 1963).
RH	Roger of Howden, <i>Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene, AD 732–1201</i> , ed. W. Stubbs, 4 vols. (RS, 1868–71).
RT	Robert of Torigni, <i>The Chronicle of Robert of Torigni (Cronica Roberti de Torigneio), Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I</i> , iv, ed. R. Howlett (RS, 1889).
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
WM, GP	William of Malmesbury, <i>Willielmi Malmesbiriensis de Gestis Pontificum Anglorum Libri Quinque</i> , ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton (RS, 1870).
WM, GR	William of Malmesbury, <i>Gesta Regum Anglorum: the History of the Kings of England</i> , ed. and trans. R. A. B. Myners, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1992–5).
WN	William of Newburgh, <i>Historia Rerum Anglicarum, Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I</i> , ed. R. Howlett, I and II (RS, 1884–5).
WP	William of Poitiers, <i>The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers</i> , ed. and trans. R. H. C. Davis and M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1998).

INTRODUCTION

The history of religious culture in medieval England has been dominated in recent decades by studies dealing variously with the early missions and the Pre-Reformation church. The intervening period, especially that from c.900 to c.1200, has been the subject of rather less attention. The reasons for this are not hard to find. For historians of Anglo-Saxon religion the business of Christianisation can be seen as substantially complete by the early tenth century. Monastic reform and the ‘Normanisation’ of the church in England both form important historiographical pendants to narratives of Anglo-Saxon religious change, but in both cases the story has tended to be one of politics, institutions and ‘high’ cultural exchange.¹ Revisionist interpreters of the Reformation meanwhile have inevitably concentrated on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in their efforts to rescue late medieval Catholicism from the condescension of Protestant posterity. Historians so engaged have stretched back to the thirteenth century where early forms of later offices and institutions such as churchwardens and chantries are dimly visible, but they seldom reached out deeper into time.² Such reluctance is in part a result of scarce resources: the rich harvest of fifteenth-century evidence – wills, letters, churchwardens’ accounts, visitation returns, sermons, instruction manuals, church art and objects – is wholly vanished or much diminished by the time we get back to the twelfth. Julia Smith has put the perceived problem in a nutshell: ‘there simply is not adequate evidence to pursue the questions that interest historians of lay religiosity

¹ An important exception, which also reaches as far as the twelfth century, is J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005).

² For example see A. Brown, *Popular Piety in Late Medieval England: the Diocese of Salisbury, 1250–1550* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 19–46. On chantries see K. L. Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries in Britain* (Cambridge, 1965). On churchwardens see J. R. H. Moorman, *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1945), p. 143; B. Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: the Rise and Reformation of the English Parish, c. 1400–1560* (Aldershot, 1996).

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before c.1200'.³ Diffidence about this earlier period is also fostered by the assumption that the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 in some sense marks a break with the past and that the religious landscape was transformed by a revolution which it accelerated or even inaugurated. The agenda of the council epitomizes a slow transformation which reformers were eager to bring about, now identified by historians as a shift from a church defined by cult, liturgy and right praxis to a 'pastoral' church ever more concerned with surveillance and shaping of belief through preaching and catechesis.⁴ So in respect of evidence left to us, and more deeply, in respect of the social realities determining what was written and preserved, the twelfth century has come, for historians of later medieval religion, to be 'another country, another world'.⁵

Neglect of this period is, of course, relative rather than absolute. There is a long and immensely distinguished scholarly tradition of works of institutional history and ecclesiastical biography dealing with the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The scope of recent work has also broadened beyond this. We are now far better informed about the parish, as John Blair and others have explored the development of local churches and proto-parochial structures from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries using textual traces and archaeological investigations.⁶ Others have begun to write about the religious lives of the ordinary faithful. Ronald Finucane, Simon Yarrow and Christopher Harper-Bill have delved into saints' lives, miracle collections and charter evidence to engage in this enterprise.⁷ The picture that they have constructed is valuable but inevitably fragmentary because of the limitations of what can be achieved

³ J. M. H. Smith, 'Regarding Medievalists: Contexts and Approaches', in M. Bentley (ed.), *A Companion to Historiography* (London, 1997), pp. 105–15 at p. 108.

⁴ J. M. H. Smith, 'Religion and Lay Society', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *New Cambridge Medieval History, II: (700–900)* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 654–78 at p. 661; P. Biller, 'Popular Religion in the Central and Later Middle Ages', in Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography*, pp. 221–46.

⁵ To borrow a phrase used in a very different context in E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400–1580* (London, 1992), p. 593.

⁶ See for example J. Blair (ed.), *Minsters and Parish Churches: the Local Church in Transition 950–1250* (Oxford, 1988); J. Blair and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992); J. Blair and C. Pyrah (eds.), *Church Archaeology: Research Directions for the Future* (York, 1996).

⁷ Recent work which makes use of the charter evidence includes C. Harper-Bill, 'Searching for Salvation in Anglo-Norman East Anglia', in C. Harper-Bill, C. Rawcliffe and R. G. Wilson (eds.), *East Anglia's History: Studies in Honour of Norman Scarfe* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 19–40; C. Harper-Bill, 'Church and Society in Twelfth-Century Suffolk: the Charter Evidence', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, 35 (1983), pp. 203–12; R. C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London, 1977); S. Yarrow, *Saints and their Communities: Miracle Stories in Twelfth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006); D. Postles, 'Religious Houses and the Laity in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century England: an Overview', *Haskins Society Journal*, 12 (2002), pp. 1–13; J. Burton, *The Monastic Order in Yorkshire, 1069–1215* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 193–5.

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with scattered and often unpromising evidence. Charters can disclose much about the piety of the aristocracy, but reveal far less about wider society. Miracle collections brightly illuminate relations between devotees and their saints, but they can also be treacherous, encouraging us to dwell on the cults at the expense of other features of belief and praxis.

Therefore this book will try to do something new. It deals with one aspect of religious culture, beliefs about the supernatural, in what we might think about as a (very) long twelfth century running from c.1050 to c.1215. But, as this period is, in historiographical terms, ‘another country, another world’, it will also use a different body of evidence to begin the business of exploration. Where others have drawn on archaeology, miracle collections and charters to offer a framework for their analysis, I intend to turn to a source which, paradoxically, is both the most obvious and the least used by historians for this sort of work: chronicles. The period encompassed by this book coincides with a profusion of historical writing in England and Normandy and so the archive is rich. It is my suggestion, and a central argument of this book, that chronicles have much to contribute to our understanding of religious culture for an age in which other resources are thin on the ground. Portents, signs, miracles, demons, angels, saints, ghosts, magical practices and even ritual sacrifices emerge in these narratives. While many historians have used the chronicles as staples of political history, few have made much of this curious exotica scattered through the more humdrum narrative of kings, battles and ecclesiastical affairs. Robert Bartlett is unusual in this respect.⁸ In choosing to draw heavily on chronicles for the chapters of his history of Norman and Angevin England dealing with religion, Bartlett has been able to evoke the richness and variety of that aspect of culture in a way others have seldom managed. In doing this, he illustrates what might be achieved with this material.

Yet some further justification for putting the chronicles centre-stage in a monograph is needed. In essence, the intellectual reasons for making such ‘narrative’ sources the scaffold for this book about religion are not much different from the reasons for using them as a skeleton for political history. But, in thinking about the value of chronicles, there are also issues more specific to this sort of inquiry which demand attention. We need to consider the problems of studying religious culture using sources generated by a learned elite and the dangers of approaching medieval religion using the concept of the supernatural. Before addressing either of these issues however, we shall turn first to the phenomenon which makes this book possible: the proliferation of historical writing in the Anglo-Norman realm.

⁸ R. Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 442–81, 616–92.

The reasons for the 'twelfth-century history boom' need only the briefest treatment here as they have been much discussed elsewhere. Some of the earliest historical writing produced in the wake of the Norman Conquest may well have been defensive in purpose. English monasteries may have anticipated that their landed assets might be expropriated or the claims of their saintly patrons contested and so produced historical and hagiographical texts to justify both.⁹ Recent research has also tended to stress more positive reasons for churchmen picking up their pens after 1066.¹⁰ Anglo-Saxon nostalgia and Norman curiosity both played an initial part here, but the steady formation of a distinctively 'Anglo-Norman' sensibility, awakened in chroniclers such as Orderic Vitalis and William of Malmesbury a deeper interest in fitting Norman and Anglo-Saxon pasts together.¹¹ These men wrote massive synchronising histories which erased many of the contours of ethnic hostility which are so evident in first-generation narratives.

This historiographical renaissance, however we interpret its causes, brought not only quantitative but also qualitative change.¹² Where Anglo-Saxon historical writing had been characterised by the spare annalistic format, the twelfth century witnessed the composition of much fuller narratives. Black monks led the way. Orderic styled himself as Bede's heir and promised the same kind of expansive 'ecclesiastical' history; William of Malmesbury patterned his writing on a variety of classical archetypes, wearing his knowledge of dozens of classical texts on his sleeve as he wrote monumental history on a similar scale to Orderic. History also came to be written by an increasingly diverse range of authors. Beyond the cloister, seculars wrote about the past inside different frames of

⁹ For the English dimension see J. Campbell, 'Some Views of the Anglo-Saxon Past', in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), pp. 209–28; M. Brett, 'John of Worcester and his Contemporaries', in R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (eds.), *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: essays presented to Richard William Southern* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 101–26; J. Barrow, 'How the Twelfth-Century Monks of Worcester Perceived their Past', in P. Magdalino (ed.), *Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe* (London, 1992), pp. 53–74; A. Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England* (London, 1992), pp. 1–30, 81–106, 107–24, 153–74.

¹⁰ See for example S. J. Ridyard, 'Condigna Veneratio: post-Conquest attitudes to the saints of the Anglo-Saxons', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 9 (1986), pp. 179–206.

¹¹ This is visible in a resurgent interest in Bede. See for example *Melrose Chronicle*, pp. 1–3; WN, I, pp. 11–19; HH, pp. 6–7; WM, GR, I, p. 1. On this point see also A. Gransden, *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England* (London, 1992), pp. 138–41. For the later development and diversification of historiography in England see J. Gillingham, *The English in the Twelfth Century: Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 113–44. For the Norman historiographers see also L. Shopkow, *History and Community: Norman Historical Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Washington, DC, 1997).

¹² See N. F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: the Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago and London, 1977).

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reference from the early Benedictine historiographers. Diocesan clergy such as Henry of Huntingdon and Gerald of Wales were joined by clerical *curiales* like Walter Map and Roger of Howden. Even within the ranks of monastic chroniclers, historical writing evolved during the course of the century and often acquired a more worldly edge, with, for example, Jocelin of Brakelond's belt and braces narrative of Bury St Edmunds savouring more of administrative than sacred history.

Variety is also to be observed in the increasingly eclectic subject matter of otherwise conventional histories. Geography, natural history and extended discussions of wonders all spilled out of them. This broadening of interest was also reflected in new genres growing around the edges of the established literary forms. Gerald of Wales's reflections on Ireland and Wales blended history, geography and what some have termed 'ethnography'; Walter Map mixed history and *fabula* with moralising anecdote and political satire in his *De Nugis Curialium*; Gervase of Tilbury compiled a great tripartite encyclopedia of history, geography and wonders designed for the recreation of his patron, the German emperor Otto IV. With this diversification of content there came also a diversification of intellectual approach. Astrological and magical learning, cosmological speculations, mathematical and medical knowledge, the fruits of herbal, bestiary and lapidary, were absorbed into 'historical' writings during the course of the twelfth century. This was not simply description: these technical discourses supplied alternative ways of rationalising the world, often in terms of physical causes, which jostled the moralising explanations which had previously predominated.

This profusion of writing, its expanding scope and ambition and the growing diversity of genre and explanatory approach, ensure that chronicles have the potential to be every bit as valuable to the historian of religious culture as they are to the historian of politics. Yet the word *potential* is an important qualifier. There remain significant methodological obstacles in the way of using the chronicles as I have just proposed. The chroniclers were still a small and exclusive social group distinguished by their learning and their clerical status. How far we think this left chroniclers unable or unwilling to engage with 'unlearned' lay culture beyond the cloister or school room is the key to assessing their ultimate value. Here much depends on the historiographical assumptions with which we operate. It is to these that we must now turn.

RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN THE CENTRAL MIDDLE AGES: PROBLEMS AND SOURCES

Historians who have analysed religion in essentially sociological terms, and hence have tended to associate distinctive patterns of belief with

particular social groups, have been among those most inclined to doubt that the beliefs of the majority might be approached at all straightforwardly through texts written by learned, clerical elites. For these scholars, many of whom have taken their cue from the important work of Jacques Le Goff, three things tend to follow from this fundamental assumption. First, medieval religion was characterised by significant tensions between the beliefs of different groups within it, elite and masses, clergy and laity, learned and unlearned.¹³ Secondly, exploration of 'popular', 'folkloric' or 'unlearned' culture demands methodologies which permit clerical texts to be read 'against the grain' of their prevailing learned values. Thirdly, the most useful sources for this enterprise are those formed on cultural interfaces, for example *exempla*-collections, sermons and penitential manuals designed by the clergy to engage with, and reshape, popular or unlearned belief.¹⁴

These approaches have yielded tremendously rich and insightful research but they also seem to me to pose real problems for the study of medieval religion. The idea that the social group to which a person belongs might have such a determining effect on his or her religious convictions seems contestable.¹⁵ Even where the cultural breaks between ways of believing should be sharp, for example between monks and the aristocracy, it is in practice difficult to discern clear lines. Aristocratic families supplied the cloisters with recruits, were bound to them by the frequent exchange of gifts for prayers, and celebrated association with the life of renunciation because it seemed so valuable to the sinner in the world.¹⁶ Monk and warrior were not marooned on either side of a cultural divide and so, I would argue, it becomes harder to accept that the monastic writer cannot bear witness to the warrior's beliefs. The case

¹³ J. Delumeau, *La Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris, 1977). And for more recent versions: A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. J. M. Bak and P. A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge, 1988), pp. xiii–xvi; J. Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. A. Goldhammer (London, 1980); J. Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. A. Goldhammer (London, 1988); J. C. Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: the Living and the Dead in Medieval Society* (Chicago, 1994).

¹⁴ J. C. Schmitt, 'Religion populaire et culture folklorique', *Annales, ESC*, 31 (1976), pp. 941–53.

¹⁵ The dichotomy of popular and elite was problematised in the 1980s: M. R. O'Neill, 'From "Popular" to "Local" Religion: Issues in Early Modern European History', *Religious Studies Review*, 12 (1986), pp. 222–6; also see P. Brown, *The Cult of Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (London, 1981), pp. 18–20; C. N. L. and R. Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages: Western Europe 1000–1300* (London, 1984), esp. pp. 9–10, 12–13; A. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 14–17, 237–41, 244–57, 319; and for more recent criticisms see M. Mansfield, *Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1995), esp. pp. 130–58; M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 7; S. F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 16.

¹⁶ On this see Murray, *Reason*, and on appeal of the ascetic life to a nobility recoiling from war and wealth *ibid.*, pp. 319–404.

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for the absence of a clear line of cultural demarcation seems still more compelling at lower levels of the social hierarchy. The parish priest, escapes easy categorisation in any 'two cultures' model. On the face of it he belongs in the clerical box but how much meaning should be attached to that easy judgement is open to doubt. The aspirations of Gregorian reformers are clear enough. Their sacerdotalism demanded a celibate, non-hereditary, educated clergy more closely aligned with diocesan agendas. But priests were still, in the twelfth century, drawn largely from the peasant communities they served. They probably soaked up from the community many ideas which were local and 'unofficial' and mixed these into the formal teachings of the church. Few parish priests will serve as our witnesses in this study, and so the methodological implications of that claim are restricted. But it needs to be stressed that even archdeacons, though more learned and more closely tied to bishop and diocese than the parish clergy, were not, as we shall see, straightforwardly the champions of 'official' teaching in the localities. Their writings will loom large in what follows and, as we shall see, reveal more complex cultural formations, affinities and sympathies than one might initially expect.

We also need to address a further problem of 'two cultures' approaches to the exploration of religion. This concerns evidence. Much use has been made of *exempla* by Jean-Claude Schmitt and Aron Gurevich because they contend that in such texts churchmen appropriated elements of 'popular' or 'folkloric' culture, incorporated them into didactic stories, thus pressing them into the service of dominant clerical ideologies.¹⁷ Gurevich for example, has argued that 'folk' stories reworked by churchmen were turned into bearers of official clerical teachings as the two were combined in improving tales rich in cultural detail recognisable to the audience. The extension of this line of reasoning is that careful study might allow the historian to reconstruct from fragments in these normative texts the beliefs and values of the unlearned masses.

Yet there are problems here. First, the very act of privileging *exempla* risks distorting our view of the relationship between laity and clergy. It reinforces the assumption that religious culture was characterised by difference and friction. *Exempla*, setting out to correct abuses and improve morals, inevitably sharpened the distinction between the preacher (with his official agenda) and the audience (which needed to be corrected and chivvied towards orthodoxy and orthopraxis). As revealed in such texts, the preacher and his congregation can easily be imagined as the representatives of two very different cultures caught in a tense embrace.

¹⁷ For a case study of this approach see J. C. Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century*, trans. M. Thom (Cambridge, 1983).

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Secondly, the idea that popular or folkloric culture might easily be excavated from *exempla* seems open to question. Everything suggests that Gurevich's 'folkloric' culture would have been locally varied (we would need good reasons to think it otherwise) and yet *exempla* writers engaged in producing materials for *ad status* preaching to the ordinary laity seldom aimed their collections at specific communities or localities. While they might well have appropriated elements of 'folkloric' culture for use in their tales, it seems doubtful that these could bear quite the didactic burdens Gurevich envisages. As *exempla* tended to enjoy more than a local currency, the need for 'authenticity' in the representation of appropriated folk belief would have diminished and the possibilities for stylised and imaginative reworking would grow. The effect of all this is to make the business of recovering the 'authentic' belief of 'the folk' from *exempla* collections much more difficult.

Recovery of this 'popular' or 'folkloric culture' from another seemingly rich source, the penitential, is also attended by problems. These manuals aspired to comprehensiveness in the advice offered to confessors about the unchristian beliefs and practices they were to root out. And yet they mixed very general moral prohibitions against murder, robbery, adultery, sacrilege and fornication with injunctions against 'folk' beliefs and practices which appear to have been much more specific.¹⁸ The problem here lies in measuring the significance of these very particular references. They might be quite widespread in the texts, surfacing in a variety of manuscripts over a considerable geographical area, but this might not mean that such beliefs and practices were widespread too. The snippets of text might travel not because they were applicable in the regions where the penitentials were put to use but because they kept the company of a host of general moral injunctions which *were* socially relevant and valuable to the confessor. The innate conservatism of canon law is important here: the recopying and stitching together of existing canons might ensure that local details were swept up and widely circulated even if their relevance was lost.

Exempla and penitentials can thus conjure up powerful illusions. But there is also a further difficulty about using them. It has long been axiomatic that *exempla* and penitential handbooks allow us to see the beliefs of those they were designed to instruct only through a glass darkly. But these texts might also be treacherous if used to reconstruct the

¹⁸ On the large part played by sexual morality in penitential literature see P.J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: the Development of a Sexual Code 550-1150* (London, 1984), esp. pp. 52-3; J. A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* (London, 1995), pp. 72-96.

thought of churchmen who wrote them. Conventions of particular didactic genres and the weight of legal and theological tradition shaped these writings to an unusual degree, complicating the relationship between author and text. The key question here is what happens when clerical authors were freed from the close constraints which govern normative genres. An exploration of the narrative sources allows us to pose tentative answers. In them, we get a chance to observe clerical authors – and on rare but precious occasions clerical authors who also produced normative writings – operating in a different literary context, subject to different ‘rules’ of genre. This exercise will be a major theme of this book.

If ‘two cultures’ models of religious culture, and the evidence which they depend upon, seem problematic, might an alternative approach help? Recent work on the religious history of England, particularly the rich historiography of the fifteenth century, has taken less account of the ‘two cultures’ thesis and many scholars in this field have tended to assume a more culturally homogeneous ‘Christian Middle Ages’.¹⁹ Historians such as Eamon Duffy and John Bossy have argued for the existence of a single community of Christian believers bound together by shared belief, ritual and practice.²⁰ Duffy in particular has suggested that systematic clerical teaching, the sacramental system of the church and the danger of damnation for those who stood outside it were compelling reasons for the laity to adhere to orthodoxy and orthopraxis which, in their parochial expressions, they had in any case been heavily involved in shaping. The spiritual bindings of this community were explicitly Christian. Life was marked by sacramental rites of passage. Time was marbled by the church’s annual pattern of feasts and fasts. Where the faithful needed supernatural aid, they turned not to ‘pagan’ or ‘magical’ remedies but to practices evolved from the liturgy.²¹ Duffy invites us to imagine medieval religion

¹⁹ For this idea see J. Van Engen, ‘The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem’, *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), pp. 519–52; and the response in J. C. Schmitt, ‘Religion, Folklore and Society in the Medieval West’, in L. K. Little and B. H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Debating the Middle Ages: issues and readings* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 376–87.

²⁰ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 2–6; J. Bossy, *Christianity in the Medieval West 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985). For a contrary argument about the teasing apart of beliefs of (increasingly) learned social elites and ordinary parishioners in the later middle ages, see C. Richmond, ‘Religion and the Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman’, in R. B. Dobson (ed.), *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth-Century* (Gloucester, 1984), pp. 193–208; C. Richmond, ‘The English Gentry and Religion c.1500’, in C. Harper-Bill (ed.), *Religious Belief and Ecclesiastical Careers in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 121–50.

²¹ For the view Duffy is challenging see K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1971), pp. 27–57.

not as separate boxes containing distinctive cultures but as a spectrum along which varied co-existing pieties were arrayed.

We might be tempted to apply this approach to religious culture in the central middle ages. Indeed, research into the cult of saints in the earlier period suggests that a version of this model has much to commend it. Despite the localism of many individual cults, studies of miracle collections suggest the existence of substantial unities. Saints might have particular clienteles, drawing their pilgrims primarily from the peasants of local parishes or the monks of a community which housed the shrine, but the communion ultimately transcended such divisions in the universality of its appeal. The help of the saints was sought by ordinary priest and prelate, monk and layman, knight and peasant and by men and women from the four corners of medieval England.²² The 'very special dead' were at the centre of twelfth-century religion and possessed a widespread imaginative power. Repertoires of ritual employed to draw down aid also resembled each other from shrine to shrine. Similar patterns of vowed coins and candles, pernoctation near to the tomb, even 'measuring' diseased limbs to the saint with a thread which was turned into a trindle emerged across England. And yet, just as it is dangerous to rely too exclusively on the witness of penitentials and *exempla*, so it is also risky to trust exclusively the testimony of miracle collections. In doing so, we might simply substitute for the tensions of 'two cultures' harmonies of a 'Christian Middle Ages' perhaps more appropriate to a later period.

For the fact is that, in thinking about religious belief and practice, we must be mindful of the otherness of that 'other country' which was twelfth-century England. First, England in c.1100 had only relatively recently been on the receiving end of the last in a series of transfusions of pagan blood (courtesy of the second phase of Viking incursions). In the eleventh century pagan practices were still the subject of legislative campaigns and even in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries ecclesiastical criticisms of these lingered.²³ This must inevitably raise questions about the character of twelfth-century religious culture that are less pressing when thinking about the later middle ages. We need to consider how these references should be evaluated and whether there was scope for the 'pagan' to linger within the formal structures of Christianity or beneath the surface of official observances. Secondly, we must also think about the connected issue of pastoral provision. If the faithful were bound into a

²² J. Sumption, *Pilgrimage: an Image of Medieval Religion* (London, 1975), pp. 54–8, 133. See also for a similar argument about late antiquity Brown, *Saints*, pp. 13–22.

²³ For legislation against non-Christian religious practice in the wake of these incursions see F. Barlow, *The English Church, 1000–1066: a history of the later Anglo-Saxon Church* (London, 1963), pp. 259–60.

single Christian community, then much hinges on the forms of pastoral care afforded them. This in turn depends on the education of the local clergy and their ability to minister to their flocks and transmit knowledge through preaching, teaching and catechesis.

Thirdly, and perhaps most fundamentally, we also need to recognise that the official teachings of the church in this period themselves lacked the clarity which they had come to possess by the later middle ages. The creation of new and shared intellectual discourses about the faith was the work of the twelfth century. That process of scholastic debate stretched by Sir Richard Southern's rough estimation up to c.1170, by which point a basic theology had been hammered out (though much, as he acknowledged, was still open and contested). Then began the matter of fashioning what was agreed into new systems of teachings which might be digested in diocese and parish, a task begun by men such as Peter Chanter and the scholars who sat at his feet in Paris during the last quarter of the twelfth century.²⁴

This sketch should not imply any simple 'trickle-down' of new teachings. Southern himself would not have accepted such a contention and recent work by historians sensitive to the implications of the linguistic turn caution us further against any such simple assumption. They have shown that the church, as it engaged with lay communities, proved unable to 'fix' the denotations of sacred words, rituals and symbols in quite the ways intended.²⁵ For reasons intrinsic to language itself, preaching and catechesis in practice multiplied meanings which they had sought to confine. Yet I also want to enter two caveats to such arguments here. The first is a minor point and it leads us back to the questionable usefulness of distinguishing the thought of the clergy from that of the laity: if meanings were difficult to fix in exchanges between teaching clergy and their flocks, then we should anticipate similar complexity in the conversations among churchmen. We must recall, in other words, that the thought of churchmen was far from monolithic in practice even if they subscribed in theory to shared teachings.²⁶ It is my contention that we can discern something of this in reflections about the world and the faith contained in the clerical writings to be discussed in the following pages.

²⁴ For a summary of this view see R. W. Southern, *Robert Grosseteste: the Growth of an English Mind in Medieval Europe*, rev. edn (Oxford, 1992), pp. 238–43. For a prime example of debates far from closed in the twelfth century see the discussion of teaching about post-mortem expiation in J. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. A. Goldhammer (London, 1984); C. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995), esp. pp. 279–317.

²⁵ See for example Rubin, *Corpus Christi*.

²⁶ On this point see G. Macy, 'Was there a "the Church" in the Middle Ages?', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Unity and Diversity in the Church* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 107–16.

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The second point is perhaps of greater importance. Arguments about the essential instability of meaning, whether applied to conversations among the clergy or attempts to instruct the laity, must not be pressed too far. We need to avoid being dazzled by the diversity that we have discovered in medieval religious culture as a result of them. Meanings might indeed proliferate as churchmen preached and catechised, but frequencies in the case of certain understandings and denotations of rituals, images and texts were greater than in the case of others. Mapping this range of meanings is easier than testing their relative frequencies and so we might be more naturally inclined to do just that, risking a partial reconstruction of religious culture. Moreover, such mapping exercises also, indirectly, feed our own preoccupations. The richness and plurality uncovered in medieval religion appeals to the twenty-first century historian immersed in a culture where such characteristics are affirmed and celebrated. Yet to privilege them in medieval Christianity risks settling for a reading too coloured by the concerns of our own postmodern and post-Christian age. Cores of shared thought and action gave medieval Christianity its power: through these came explanation and consolation. The development of shared ideas and practices surely generated tension as churchmen tried to tighten religious observance in the localities and inculcate new or more closely defined beliefs. Nevertheless, this process also involved collusion as well. The business of creating and disseminating a practical theology, of sculpting the abstract formulations of the schools into workable systems of religious praxis and belief, forced churchmen to engage with lay needs and to make compromises with the local communities which sustained the developing parishes. Thus, although significant diversity was intrinsic to Christianity in the central middle ages, reflected in religious localism, sustained by ongoing compromises between church teaching and lay demands, it was also circumscribed by widely shared needs which the faith must meet.

TEXT, AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE

The notes of scepticism that I have already sounded about the notion that social category had a determining effect on belief have further ramifications for the approach taken in this book. It is one of its central contentions that ecclesiastical chroniclers do not stand as representatives of a monolithic clerical culture but rather as members of more complex and varied communities. Membership of a monastic house or association with a diocese or a sense of solidarity within an order or school had a shaping but not determining effect on their outlook. We need to remember that even monks were usually not writing in deep seclusion: to believe this

would be to swallow idealised images of their separation from the world and to neglect kernels of truth in caricatures of worldliness. Richard of Devizes mischievously observed that, for all the trumpeted asceticism and remoteness of the Carthusians, they seemed better-informed about secular business than he was, a Benedictine supposedly fallen from grace; Walter Map felt able to lampoon money-grubbing Cistercians for the benefit of his court audience.²⁷ Almost by definition, the monks and canons who wrote history were in regular communication with the world. They were also shaped by experiences before they entered the cloister and might dredge up memories from childhood as they wrote in maturity and old age. William of Newburgh recalled from his boyhood in the north-east a *res mirabilis*, a story about a peasant who stumbled on a fairy banquet in a hill as he walked home one night and stole a silver cup from the supernatural revellers as a memento.²⁸ Monastic chroniclers remained in contact with the world in later life too. The oblate Orderic knew about politics through a web of informants and about local (and sometimes more distant) affairs through his own travels. He went far afield to Crowland and to Worcester but he also wandered the countryside around his own monastery of St Évroul. We learn, for example, that, on hearing of the providential destruction of a hay cart by a lightning bolt at Planches, he hurried from La Merlerault, where he had been staying, 'to be certain of the facts before recording for posterity how the blow fell from heaven'.²⁹ Orderic's fellow Benedictine William of Malmesbury was better travelled. Rodney Thomson has observed that his extensive journeyings – to Canterbury, Glastonbury, Worcester, Bury St Edmunds, Oxford, Rochester, Sherborne, Crowland, Hereford, York, Carlisle and more – must have demanded some relaxation of the Rule. He travelled in the first instance to plunder information from the libraries, but he scooped up oral recollections and eyewitness evidence too as he traversed the realm.³⁰

This 'worldliness' had a further effect on the way chroniclers wrote. It obliged them to criss-cross a line between two different kinds of knowledge which we might loosely think of as being derived respectively from revelation and experience. The church taught firmly that truths were disclosed most surely through the former and could be apprehended in the scriptures. But some at least within the church were becoming more comfortable with the idea that truths might also be approached through sense-experience and the exercise of reason. The business of writing history obliged the chronicler to engage with both of these ways of

²⁷ RD, p. 2; Map, 84–113. ²⁸ WN, II, p. 85. ²⁹ OV, VI, pp. 438–9.

³⁰ R. M. Thomson, 'William of Malmesbury', *DNB*, xxxvi, pp. 348–51.

thinking. His scriptural formation and theological training taught how the world should be, but experience acquired through the craft of history forced him also to deal with the messy complexity of the world as it was. Both approaches, in theory, should have led to the same destination. History had the power to illuminate theology because by reading about the past, as John of Salisbury observed, 'the invisible things of God may be clearly seen through the things that are done'.³¹ But, in practice, chroniclers found difficulty in trying to reconcile revelation and experience. They struggled to discern in the messy complexities of existence those signs, glories and punishments which theology suggested might be there.

This problem is important. If chroniclers responded by subjugating history to the demands of theology, then narratives of past events would be emplotted in profoundly ahistorical ways. But, on the whole, they did not react in this way.³² The intractability of history instead provoked two contrasting responses. One was to abandon the whole business of contingent speculation about the past in favour of the firm truths which scripture supplied. This was the 'Cistercian solution'. The order (at least in its formal avowals) eschewed writing history because it entangled one in vanities and frivolities. Side-lining the study of the past became one more way in which the world was to be rejected.³³

The other response was to write history while admitting that meanings extracted from it were contingent and provisional and, in a sense, endlessly deferred. This was the solution of the Benedictine monks, Augustinian canons and secular clergy who are the principal *dramatis personae* of the following pages. The writers who took such a view inked out their accounts with a deep self-consciousness that the historian's powers of explanation were circumscribed and that his calling was in consequence a humble one. This idea was rehearsed regularly in prefaces. Yet its frequency should not suggest we are dealing merely with the mechanical utterance of a 'humility' topos but rather that we are witnessing the expression of an important consensus about the historical project and its limitations.³⁴ Prefatory acknowledgement that historical writing had

³¹ John of Salisbury, *The Historia Pontificalis of John of Salisbury*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1986), p. 3.

³² The exception here might be Anselm's treatment of history as he was interested in the unchangeableness of God rather than the flux of human affairs. See G. R. Evans, 'St Anselm and Sacred History', in Davis and Wallace-Hadrill (eds.), *Writing of History*, pp. 187–209 at p. 201.

³³ In practice some houses swiftly began to produce chronicles. See E. A. Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Historical Writing in England, c.1150–1220* (Turnhout, 2002).

³⁴ For the deployment of topos in prefaces see A. Gransden, 'Prologues in the Historiography of Twelfth-Century England', in D. Williams (ed.), *Twelfth-Century England: proceedings of the Harlaxton Symposium 1988* (Woodbridge, 1990), pp. 55–81.

limited explanatory power supplied a measure of absolution from the obligation to interpret. It set the chronicler at liberty to leave loose ends untied. Faced by inexplicable drownings of many people in pools around St Évroul, Orderic Vitalis observed, 'I am not able to unravel the divine plan by which all things are made and cannot explain the hidden causes of things; I am engaged merely in the writing of historical annals . . . Who can penetrate the inscrutable? I make a record of events as I have seen or heard of them, for the benefit of future generations . . .'³⁵ Writing at the end of the twelfth century, William of Newburgh uttered standard words about his unworthiness in his preface but he also pressed them into service when tackling difficult cases. Dealing with a mysterious portent which appeared on the London to Dunstable road, William said that he was unable to explain what this foreshadowed. Excusing himself, he added that everyone must make their own estimation of its meaning 'for I am but a simple narrator, and not a predicting interpreter'.³⁶ That there was pattern and meaning in history was without question, but William, like his peers, was not obliged to work all of this out: some at least of the labour was left to the audience.

The task of writing history thus became less grandiose but also less daunting. It meant setting down those things which the particular author deemed 'worthy of being remembered'; conserving memory of the past for the judgement of posterity and allowing others to ponder its deeper mysteries.³⁷ Orderic Vitalis warned his readers that if history was not captured in ink then worlds would vanish, 'as hail or snow melt in the waters of a swift river, swept away by the current never to return'.³⁸ William of Newburgh evoked his art in similar if more prosaic terms, explaining that Abbot Ernald of Rievaulx had commissioned him to write 'for the knowledge and instruction of posterity'.³⁹ If, he contended, knowledge of recent events was not 'transmitted to lasting memory by written documents', then 'the negligence of modern men must be deservedly blamed'.⁴⁰ Prosaic or poetic, the implications of these prefatory claims were similar. Theology might have priority in the chronicler's thoughts but it would not have all-consuming power over his account of the past. The chronicler humbly offered an image of the world. It was for others to do the difficult job of deducing truths from

³⁵ OV, vi, pp. 436–7. ³⁶ WN, i, p. 308.

³⁷ For this formulation see Gervase of Canterbury, *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols. (RS, 1879–80), i, p. 89.

³⁸ OV, iii, pp. 284–5. ³⁹ WN, i, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18. Cf. Gerald of Wales's dedication to Henry II in GW, *TH*, p. 21.

the history he had written, to work out from 'the things that are done' the 'invisible things of God'.

This contention runs against the grain of some recent research which has been at pains to point out the literariness of the medieval chronicle. Its production turned on the emplotment of material according to ideological commitments, narrative tropes and the powerful shaping effects of genre.⁴¹ Yet genre cannot be the unmoved mover of chronicle writing, confining and shaping that which was said. Such conventions were themselves plastic in the twelfth century as history was, as we have observed, written in proliferating forms.⁴² We must also be careful not to allow a valuable attentiveness to the literariness of medieval historical writing to dissolve its essential historical claims. Monika Otter, in a lively exploration of twelfth-century chronicle production, has been eager to find the fictive heart in these narratives. For her, the marvellous and supernatural became 'a sign of self-conscious fiction', a discursive arena within the chronicle in which 'playful self-referentiality' became possible and a commentary was offered through this on the very business of writing history.⁴³ But it is far from clear that the chroniclers viewed tales of wonders as opportunities for this kind of reflexive exercise. Indeed, it is far from clear that they forged distinctions between 'the historical' and the fictive in quite the way Otter wants to suggest. The power (and danger) of the marvellous lay not in the opportunities it afforded for authorial introspection but rather in the glimpses it supplied of disturbing alternative realities.

Other students of chronicles have responded to the linguistic turn in a different way, perceiving the text as a form of political instrumentality and objecting to any attempt to reach through it to the world the text claims to represent. For example Gabrielle Spiegel has examined vernacular chronicle-writing in thirteenth-century France in order to show how historical narratives used the appearance of truthful reportage as a tool to create a socially and politically useful past.⁴⁴ In this account, the past is instrumentalised and refashioned, even as the chronicler claims to recover

⁴¹ See J. Blacker, *The Faces of Time: Portrayal of the Past in Old French and Latin Historical Narrative of the Anglo-Norman Regnum* (Austin, TX, 1994); M. Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century English Historical Writing* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

⁴² G. T. Shepherd, 'The Emancipation of Story', in H. Bekker-Nielsen, P. Foote, A. Haarder and P. Sørensen (eds.), *Medieval Narrative: Proceedings of the Third International Symposium for the Study of Vernacular Literature in the Middle Ages* (Odense, 1979), pp. 44–57.

⁴³ See for example Otter, *Inventiones*, pp. 93–5.

⁴⁴ G. Spiegel, 'Theory into Practice: Reading Medieval Chronicles', in E. Kooper (ed.), *The Medieval Chronicle* (Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 1–12; also G. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: the Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, 1997).

it, and the ‘verisimilitude’ of that representation depends not upon correspondence of the text’s claims to observed realities but rather upon its consonance with larger ideological structures. The text works to authorise and reinforce the social, political and ideological commitments of the audience for whom it was fashioned. And yet, as Spiegel readily admits, to make such a point about the essential opacity of the chronicles demands that she accept that other texts offered more straightforward access to extra-textual social and political realities. Only by applying such an evidential double standard would it be possible to elucidate the social, economic and political circumstances of authors and audiences which gave rise to the ideological commitments shaping chronicle-narrative.

The argument, at once powerful and disconcerting, is problematic because it stretches a valuable point to an extreme. It also depends on a vision of the audience which gives rise to further difficulty. There are good reasons to think that chroniclers and their audiences lacked the sort of ideological cohesion needed for chronicles to function in the ways Spiegel suggests. In thinking about the intended audience, we need to acknowledge that this need not have been a charmed circle. If we consider for a moment the case of the Latin chronicles, we are not necessarily dealing with a purely clerical constituency. Many chroniclers had an eye on aristocratic lay patrons (to whom their works were frequently dedicated) as well as readers within the church. When the target audience was primarily the professed religious it must also be recalled that monasteries were not quite the places of spiritual introversion that their rules and apologetic proclaimed. Orderic Vitalis’s account of the past was composed for ‘pleasure and profit of the servants of God’ and was marked up with breathings for reading aloud, perhaps in the refectory.⁴⁵ Its contents might have been expected to filter out not only to learned oblates but also to adult converts among whose ranks were retired warriors. Thus Orderic’s discussions of conversion to the monastic life, of sacrilegious acts, of managing sin through gift-giving, though they might be stylised, needed nonetheless to resonate with men who knew the world and its values all too well.

That the audiences for chronicles were not sealed off within their own cultural sphere, contained within their own distinctive ‘environments’ of knowledge about the wider world means that the audience would have acted as a control on historical representation. Faced by a more heterogeneous audience, verisimilitude could not depend on shared ideologies but would have to rely more on consonance with observed social,

⁴⁵ OV, I, pp. 107–10.

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political and cultural realities. Such demands would have been most powerful where things described were familiar and close at hand. Chronicles, for all their inevitable selectivity, might thus most obviously afford valuable information about customs and rituals of locality and region. But they are also valuable in another way. The miraculous, the demonic and more ambiguous manifestations of the supernatural are all depicted in chronicles as part of the fabric of local and immediate experience. Here the strategies of authentication and authorisation employed offer clues about how the chronicler expected his audience to receive a story and how, in consequence, the ordinary course of nature and 'supernatural' eruptions within it were imagined. From relative weights of testimony and corroboration piled up in support of different accounts, we can discern something of what it was anticipated the audience would find it easier or harder to believe.

CONCEPTUALISING THE SUPERNATURAL

Employing the concept of the supernatural in an exploration of twelfth-century culture needs some justification because the chroniclers themselves used terms which were either more precise or more general than this word. They wrote quite specifically of miracles (*miracula*), demons, signs (*signa/portenta*). But they also employed a series of more elastic terms: *monstrum* (wonders, frequently monstrous, which revealed or portended something usually undefined), prodigy (*prodigium*) and marvel (*mirum/mirabilium*) in order to connote the ambiguously uncanny. The term *supernaturalis* was available in the twelfth century but seems to have acquired close definition and widespread use only in the later thirteenth, thanks in large measure to the efforts of Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, I would contend that the idea preceded its sharp formulation as a concept. The mistake here might be to imagine that the theologians drove change when in reality they followed developments which they were obliged to accommodate. As we shall see, 'natural' and 'supernatural' were distinguished in a rough-and-ready fashion before definitions were formalised in the schools.⁴⁷ Even Augustine seemed to allow such a distinction.⁴⁸ Twelfth-century representations of his thinking emphasised the ultimate

⁴⁶ Studies of the subject include H. de Lubac, *Surnaturel: études historiques* (Paris, 1946); E. Langton, *Supernatural: the Doctrine of Spirits, Angels and Demons from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London, 1934).

⁴⁷ See for example G. de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam, 1987).

⁴⁸ C. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), pp. 48–9.

wondrousness of all things because they proceeded from the first and greatest miracle of creation itself. But they also allowed that, from the subjective standpoint of men, God seemed to work both through the ordered patterns of nature and more directly, ‘miraculously’, in his creation. Benedicta Ward has described this as a ‘psychological’ theory of miracle. At its root was a distinction between ordinary and extraordinary manifestations of divine power, the embryo, in other words, of a separation of natural and supernatural orders.⁴⁹

Most chroniclers were equipped with at least this basic Augustinian intellectualisation of the customary course of nature and things contrary to it and responded intuitively to the wonder which the extraordinary evoked.⁵⁰ Even the schematic accounts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle found space for comets, bloodmoons and showers of stars which stood out against the grain of common experience and acquired some special significance as a consequence. Eleventh- and twelfth-century chronicles incorporated more elaborate stories of wild huntsmen, devils, apparitions, revenants, fairies and strange subterranean worlds. These, like the comets and bloodmoons, demanded attention because they were significant and because they stirred up astonishment.⁵¹ Associated with that distinction between the ordinary and extraordinary, we also discover a field of emotional language connotative of wonder.⁵² Just as there was no sharply delineated idea of *the* supernatural there was also no clear-cut category of *the* wondrous or *the* marvellous, but chroniclers did mark strange events out as *mirabilis*, *prodigiosus* or *monstruosus*.⁵³

So, although in a theological sense *the* supernatural did not exist as a formal intellectual category in the twelfth century, the embryo of the idea had already come into being. God’s interventions in the world were not thought in any technical sense to be ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ a nature in which pattern and order was the product of autonomy. But, as Alexander Murray has noted, firmer distinctions were steadily being drawn between the observed patterns of nature and anomalies within them.⁵⁴ The meaning of the word *supernaturalis* may have been refined by Thomas Aquinas

⁴⁹ See the discussion of Augustine’s view in B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000–1215* (London, 1982), pp. 3–4.

⁵⁰ Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, pp. 41, 91.

⁵¹ See K. Daston and L. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York, 1998), pp. 50–3.

⁵² Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, pp. 37–75.

⁵³ Jacques Le Goff points out that there was no straightforward notion of *the* marvellous in the Middle Ages expressed by a single Latin term. See Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination*, pp. 27–44 and esp. pp. 27–8. See also P. Mabilley, *Le Miroir de merveilleux* (Paris, 1962); M. Meslin, *Le Merveilleux: l’imagination et les croyances en occident* (Paris, 1984); T. Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris, 1970).

⁵⁴ Murray, *Reason and Society*, pp. 9–14.

but the germ of the idea was present in the world and reflected in the chronicles long before it acquired a full theological rationalisation.

WRITING ABOUT THE SUPERNATURAL

Some final comments are needed about the scope of this book. Although the discussion focuses primarily on a 'long' twelfth century, I have occasionally reached outside this period in order to examine particular themes. This is especially appropriate when we come to evaluate the shadowy and fragmented evidence for 'pagan survivals' in chapter 2. Here we need to think about what this 'paganism' which might have 'survived' looked like in the first place and to address late instances of supposed survival (in the thirteenth century, for example), lest these render premature claims about an earlier death. But it will also be important to reach out beyond the long twelfth century when considering parochial structures and pastoral care. Thus the abundant synodal legislation of the early thirteenth century will, in particular, be important for the clues it offers about local ecclesiastical infrastructures at the very end of the period.

A book about the supernatural in the twelfth century cannot engage solely with the narrative histories even if it claims a special place for them. I will also draw therefore on a range of other texts such as *vitae*, *miracula*, penitentials, synodal legislation, sermon literature and even romances in order to put the chronicle material in context. Normative sources have an important place in this study as they help us to explore aspects of 'official' church teaching as they emerged and evolved. Given that some of these texts had a very widespread impact, I have drawn them from a wide compass rather than restricting myself to material composed exclusively within the Anglo-Norman realm itself. Narrative sources, in contrast, are drawn from a more confined area, concentrating on England and Normandy. Even here though, I have sometimes pushed out across political boundaries to include the Scottish borders and southern and eastern Wales. Cultural geography seldom respected political or ecclesiastical frontiers in the middle ages, a tendency magnified by the uncertain limits of Anglo-Norman power as it waxed and waned in the marches of Wales and southern fringes of Scotland. True to these complex political and cultural dynamics, the interests of many of our authors ranged similarly across borders, a tendency most immediately clear in the work of Gerald of Wales but visible too in the writings of Walter Map and the Lanercost chronicler.

A word also needs to be said about terms and labels. Although much ink has already been spilt over the subject, we must ponder for a moment an appropriate vocabulary with which to describe medieval religious

culture. I have chosen here to replace rather than refine the language of elite/popular, clerical/lay because even a loose use of such terms, as some historians have recently ventured, risks implying that belief and practice was in some sense ‘socially’ determined. Lingering attachment to terminology formed in an old debate may thus be unhelpful. Instead, patterns in the texts themselves suggest an alternative starting point. Formal teachings of the church, though in some respects still fluid in the twelfth century, can nonetheless be picked out with some confidence, especially in normative texts designed to instruct the faithful. I characterise these therefore as official beliefs. But such teachings mingled in the localities with varied extra-ecclesial beliefs and practices which did not have their roots in the official, and find expression perhaps most frequently in our narrative sources, the miracle collections and chronicles in particular. It is not axiomatic that these were pagan, magical, unchristian, heretical or even heterodox so none of these labels will quite suffice. We might therefore best think of these more colourlessly, initially at least, as simply ‘unofficial’. Finally, beyond this binary, we also need a further term to capture the organic nature of lived religion in the locality because belief and practice in communities frequently seems to have blended official and unofficial, so much so that demarcation lines were invisible to the eyes of local beholders. ‘Popular religion’ has entirely the wrong connotations, conjuring an image of a layer of belief which was unofficial and yet possessed of a certain uniformity. Instead I intend to speak about the Christianity or religion of the parishes because this formulation offers more scope for the variety that recent commentators have identified in belief and practice at the local level.⁵⁵

In one sense, the structure of this book needs little explanation since its chapter headings are self-explanatory. Yet beneath the evident agendas of each chapter there are large issues that should perhaps be laid out. Chapter 1, ‘Thinking about the Supernatural’ picks up an issue we have already met: the extent to which lines may have existed between ‘nature’ and ‘supernature’ in the minds of twelfth-century believers. The [second chapter](#) probes another issue we have touched upon, namely whether twelfth-century ideas about the ‘supernatural’ might have owed anything to residues of pagan belief surviving in the interstices of Christianity or beneath a crust of superficial conformity. Chapter 3, ‘Prayers, Spells and Saints’, shifts the emphasis to an examination of tensions intrinsic to

⁵⁵ Despite the drawn-out process by which parishes evolved and were integrated into church structures, the use of the term seems justified in a book dealing with the twelfth century, not least because local religious solidarities on a parochial scale predated and drove the development of the formal parish institution. For the development of parishes see Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 426–504.

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medieval Christian belief itself, considering how the wonder-seeking and meditative impulses within medieval religion variously co-existed and competed. The next two chapters then pick up different aspects of these two strands in religious culture and explore them separately. Chapter 4, ‘Special Powers and Magical Arts’, examines a series of case studies of the worldly uses of supernatural power and the church’s response to these. The penultimate chapter, ‘Imagining the Dead’, considers attitudes to sin, penitence and the fate of souls. In so doing it also fulfils a second function because it looks at the ways in which the ‘rising’ churchmen of the schools were seeking to reinterpret the afterlife and to negotiate a new theology which balanced the worldly interests of the faithful and the fate of their souls after death. This chapter thus works as a case study of ‘re-evangelisation’, of the process by which school-trained churchmen of reformist inclination sought to transform the religious culture of medieval England and implant a revised form of belief and practice through preaching and catechesis. The sixth and [final chapter](#) brings us full circle to make a further tentative argument: that the supernatural was not simply a subject of reflection but came to be mobilised, and in strikingly new ways, as a didactic instrument.

THINKING ABOUT THE SUPERNATURAL

In thinking about the supernatural, the place to begin must be with the conceptual categories that the church offered as a means to make sense of the visible and invisible worlds: the miraculous and the demonic. These two categories had dominated the speculative thought of churchmen as they tried to make sense of the world in the early middle ages and they continued to shape the thought of churchmen at the beginning of the twelfth century. Augustine, still the most powerful influence, had indicated that God was seen to work in the world both directly through extraordinary miracles and indirectly through the ordinary course of nature. But he also insisted that ultimately this distinction was merely a matter of human convenience as all things, wondrous and non-wondrous alike, unfolded from the first and greatest of miracles which was creation itself.¹ As absorbed by many monastic authors of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, such cosmological ideas encouraged 'symbolist' interpretations of history and nature. The world was conceived as a web of signs and symbols which illustrated or illuminated scripture rather than a mass of causes and effects to be elucidated through the exercise of reason. Wonderful things in the world should not be explained in human or physical terms because 'the reasoning of men is surpassed by these wonderful works of God'.² Scripture was the only secure guide and wisdom acquired through the senses proved a shallow and fragile thing. As Anselm argued in his *Proslogion*: 'I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order that I might understand.'³ Scripture towered over

¹ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. W. M. Green, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1966–72), III, p. 308. Also see Ward, *Miracles*, p. 3.

² Augustine, *City of God*, VII, p. 30.

³ Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1946), I, pp. 89–122 at p. 100.

human reason and 'if scripture clearly contradicts what we think to be the case, then, even if our reasoning seems irrefutable, it should not be believed to contain any truth'.⁴ As a result, it became the indispensable and dominant means to interpret the visible and invisible worlds.

This way of thinking about the world informed the writing of history by many churchmen during the twelfth century, and, those who wrote under its spell, wrote history with limited ambition. Augustinian theology as it was understood in the central middle ages, obliged the historian to supply a record of events which might in some faint way light the truths of scripture and forced on him a stronger requirement to expound the moral meaning of events than to unravel their immediate causes. Where chroniclers encountered the wondrous and the assignment of causes could not be evaded, they frequently moved little beyond identifying the extraordinary as either miraculous or demonic and then delved into its significance. The search for causes, still less the working of mechanisms which gave rise to wonders, was not their business.

Despite its secure anchoring in well-established theological traditions, this vision of the world and of history was subject to challenge in the twelfth century. It was challenged in the schools by scholars who privileged the search for the causes of things, and, as we shall see, it was also challenged in the leaves of historical writings. These developments are the starting points for this chapter which will begin by exploring relationships between established Augustinian conceptualisations of the supernatural and new naturalising discourses in the work of medieval chroniclers. This will lead us to a second area of discussion: the operation of these discourses in the world beyond the text. Chronicles, because they were produced for wider audiences than the abstruse learning of the schools, offer a way into the thought of that larger 'textual community' for which a work was created. By examining strategies of presentation and authentication, we will get clues about what the chronicler thought his audience would believe easily and what he expected them to doubt. This, in turn, leads to a third area of discussion: an attempt to trace beliefs about the supernatural which were shared in common. Here the discussion will range beyond historical writing to explore other genres, thus revealing the capacity of ideas about miracles, signs and demons to inhabit a great range of texts, and, by implication, to circulate widely as cultural currencies in twelfth-century society.

⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, *De Concordia*, in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis*, II, p. 272.

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CHRONICLERS CONCEPTUALISING THE SUPERNATURAL

Though much of the conceptual, theological apparatus for writing about history and the world was shared between chroniclers, institutional setting, intellectual training and genre shaped the ways in which individuals wrote and gave rise to markedly different interpretations. We can see this if we take a series of examples from points in the spectrum of historical writings: Orderic Vitalis (a Benedictine writing in Normandy), Gerald of Wales (a secular churchman from the Welsh marches), William of Newburgh (an Augustinian canon in northern England) and Richard of Devizes (a Benedictine from southern England). At one end of this range we find Orderic Vitalis, a monastic writer of the first half of the twelfth century who was wedded to traditional providentialist readings of history. At the other we have a cluster of three writers working in the later twelfth century who modified such conventional interpretations and, in the case of Gerald of Wales, an author who also broke away from the chronicle form in writing about the recent past.

The moral universe of Orderic Vitalis

Orderic Vitalis stands here as a single case study for a significant group of chroniclers who saw the past primarily as an extension of sacred history in which the working of divine will might be detected. For them, the constant action of the creator in the world and the unfolding of His providential scheme offered a dominant means of interpretation. Orderic wrote the *Historia Ecclesiastica* between 1114 and 1137 and it ranged ultimately over church history, hagiography, Anglo-Norman, German and Italian politics and affairs in the Holy Land.⁵ He deliberately patterned the text on Bede with respect to scale and purpose, sharing with the father of English history the sense of the world as a book written by the finger of God and the wish to preserve knowledge of the past, and hence its store of moral examples, from the ravages of time.⁶ For Orderic, the hand of the creator was at work in every event, unusual and commonplace, if only men had eyes to see it:

The eternal creator wisely and providentially ordains seasonal and historical changes; he does not dispose and alter human affairs according to the pleasure of foolish men, but rightly preserves and aptly promotes and controls them in his

⁵ Orderic's project began as a humble house-history, commissioned by Roger of Le Sap, abbot of St Evroul, but Orderic steadily extended its scope. See Shopkow, *History and Community*, p. 46; Southern, 'Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing II: Hugh of St Victor and the Idea of Historical Development', *TRHS*, 5th series, 21(1971), pp. 159–79.

⁶ For such visions of history see also Evans, 'Anselm and Sacred History', p. 201.

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mighty hand and with his glorious arm. This we see with our eyes in the alternation of winter and summer; this likewise we feel in heat and cold; this we perceive in the rise and decline of all things, and can rightly comprehend in the manifold diversity of the works of God.⁷

Similar sentiments emerge in a second passage where Orderic explicitly evokes the idea that chronicles were records of the acts of God in the world:

But we must write truthfully of the world as it is and of human affairs, and a chronicle must be composed in praise of the creator and just governor of all things. For the eternal creator still works without ceasing and marvellously orders all things: and of his glorious acts let each one according to his ability and desire duly relate what is shown from on high.⁸

It should come as little surprise that Orderic took such a line, and to make sense of it we need only to consider the cultural context in which he lived and worked. Orderic was an oblate of St Évrout.⁹ In a famous passage, he described how he took leave of his father, 'a weeping child', aged ten with only the simple promise of eventual salvation among the Innocents as consolation.¹⁰ But, looking back in old age, Orderic recognised a life which had been patterned by an immediate God. This God had drawn Orderic from the world into the cloister so that he might serve Him the better, undistracted, as Orderic himself put it, 'through human affection for my family'.¹¹ Of his time at St Évrout, he added that God suffered him through his grace to 'find nothing but kindness and friendship among strangers'.¹² Orderic's own life had been formed by the realities of claustral devotions and deep belief in divine providence. Intellectually he was soaked in Augustinian theology, working in a library which seems to have possessed only limited historical and hagiographical materials and was dominated by the *lectio diuina*.¹³ Orderic read, lived and breathed an Augustinian theology of creation. In the microcosm of his own experience, as well as in texts, he found explanatory paradigms which could be used to order and make sense of the world he was writing about.

Hence Orderic's universe was a moral one, structured by divine intention and design and in consequence he, along with many other

⁷ OV, II, p. 4. ⁸ *Ibid.*, III, pp. 214–15.

⁹ On Orderic's life see *ibid.*, I, pp. 1–6, 23–9; M. Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 3–41.

¹⁰ The customnal of Bec sheds some interesting light on Orderic's formation in the cloister as a child oblate. On oblation see also *Life in the Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. G. G. Coulton, 5 vols. (Cambridge, 1910), IV, pp. 98–103.

¹¹ OV, II, p. xiii. ¹² *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

¹³ See Shopkow, *History and Community*, p. 159.

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twelfth-century monastic writers, developed a strand of Augustinian thought to an extreme in their readiness to apprehend special meanings diffused through the created order and human history. When in 1134 'many calamities occurred on earth' Orderic easily saw an unfolding pattern, concluding that 'some men were punished by them, as their sins deserved, while others looked on at strange and terrible happenings, and grew pale and trembled with fear'.¹⁴ Even where his powers of explanation faltered, his confidence that moral order underlay events was never shaken. In such instances, he told his readers and hearers: 'let each one interpret according to the inspiration he receives from Heaven, and, if he finds anything profitable to him, let him extract matter for his salvation as best he judges.'¹⁵

Gerald of Wales and the 'New Platonisms'

By the last quarter of the twelfth century, others were writing about the world in ways which contrasted starkly with Orderic's narrow emphasis on unravelling sacred meanings from the course of past events. Gerald of Wales, never a historical author in the sense that Orderic was, produced writings which spanned history, hagiography, topography, polemic, exegesis and *exempla* and in so doing frequently traversed traditional boundaries of genre. In this respect, Gerald was not (as he pleased to style himself) so much a pioneer but rather a participant in a trend. Other secular churchmen also wrote about the past but subsumed history within largely non-historical literary projects which similarly broke the bounds of genre. Gervase of Tilbury composed an encyclopedic work, *Otia Imperialia*, shot through with history but arranged into three parts dealing respectively with scripture, geography and wonders. Walter Map similarly introduced historical vignettes into his *De Nugis Curialium*, a loosely ordered, heterogeneous work designed to entertain as much as to edify or inform.¹⁶ Even John of Salisbury, although more concerned in his *Policraticus* with edification and instruction rather than recent historical anecdote, is also recognisably a member of this group of innovative authors.¹⁷

These intellectually eclectic writings were not simply different from what had gone before in their organisation and range. They also differed in style and, in the case of Gerald and Gervase, in analytical approach.

¹⁴ OV, vi, pp. 434–5. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 436–7.

¹⁶ Map, pp. xiii–xxiv; for *De Nugis*, pp. xxxii–xlv.

¹⁷ For John of Salisbury see M. Wilks (ed.), *The World of John of Salisbury* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 1–20; 39–61.

Running through the works of these two writers in particular, was an interest not just in history, meaning and in the relationship between God, man and events but also a growing concern with 'nature' and with the physical mechanisms by which change was brought about in the world.

In these preoccupations, the school-trained seculars like Gerald and Gervase were borne along in powerful currents which have been expertly fathomed by Alexander Murray. The twelfth century, Murray observed, was marked in many quarters by a growing awareness of a regular, ordered nature, an idea which was developed by twelfth-century schoolmen.¹⁸ Its patterns and rhythms were charted and explored especially by an intellectual *avant garde* of northern French masters based in centres such as Chartres. Here scholars began controversially to frame non-scriptural interpretations of nature as they dabbled in 'New Platonisms'.¹⁹ Platonist thinkers distinguished more clearly God's operations through a regular, ordered nature from his direct interventions in the form of miracles. William of Conches contended that while 'all things that are in the world were made by God except evil', God 'made some things through the operation of nature, which is the instrument of divine operation'.²⁰ In this, William was extending the thought of earlier theologians of more conservative temper such as Anselm of Canterbury, who had already differentiated things done by God directly (*miraculis*), by God working through nature (*naturalis*) and by human free will (*voluntaris*).²¹ Yet William and other exponents of the New Platonisms also moved well beyond Anselm in their desire to penetrate nature using human reason and to explain its workings using non-scriptural ideas. Andrew of St Victor even went so far as to say that 'we should realise this in

¹⁸ See Murray, *Reason and Society*, pp. 9–14; for another perspective see R. M. Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* (Amsterdam, 1952), pp. 153–220.

¹⁹ 'Platonism' is used here simply to connote a body of beliefs about causation in the natural world which show affinities with those expressed in the *Timaeus*. On the 'New Platonisms' of the twelfth century see P. Dronke (ed.), *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1988), esp. pp. 255–404. On the impact of philosophy on views of the natural world see M. D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, trans. J. Taylor and L. K. Little, (Chicago, 1968); T. Stiefel, 'The Heresy of Science: a Twelfth-Century Conceptual Revolution', *Isis*, 68 (1977), pp. 347–62; P. Dronke, 'New Approaches to the School of Chartres', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 6 (1969), pp. 117–140; R. W. Southern, *Platonism, Scholastic Method and the School of Chartres* (Reading, 1979); W. Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: the Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton, 1972); B. Stock, *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century: a Study of Bernard Silvester* (Princeton, 1972).

²⁰ William of Conches, *In Boetium*, quoted from J. M. Parent, *La Doctrine de la création dans l'école de Chartres* (Paris, 1938), p. 126.

²¹ Ward, *Miracles*, p. 4.

expounding scripture, when the event described admits of no natural cause, then, and only then, should we have recourse to miracles'.²²

Such interest in discovering the causes of things was not in straightforward tension with the concern to read history and nature as illustrations of scripture but many churchmen noticed that the former approach could have a corrosive effect on the latter. Marie-Dominique Chenu has described how the new thinking of the schools 'desacralised' nature, extracting it from the web of the miraculous and rendering its patterns intelligible through the discovery of their internal laws.²³ The radical implications of this trend are to be measured in the hostile comment let loose by its critics. Bernard of Clairvaux and a host of his followers took up the cudgels for an austere Augustinian epistemology based more exclusively in scriptural exegesis. They suggested that when nature was transformed into a mass of complex and autonomous mechanisms the idea of a world saturated with meaning was obscured. Worse, where long chains of causes were strung out between God in heaven and events on earth, the idea of a providentially ordered world might start to dissolve.

The danger identified by the Cistercians was great because these new ways of thinking were spreading. As many of the men trained in the schools came to write about history or geography or wonders, they were equipped with new intellectual tools in their quest to describe and interpret. In the second quarter of the twelfth century we can already find English writers arguing for a nature which could and should be explored through reason. Adelard of Bath, who had been trained at the schools of Tours and Laon and whose claim to fame lay ultimately in his astrological learning, rejected the idea that all of creation was miraculous and the causes of things mystical. He argued that people should in the first instance strive to find the causes of things rather than meekly ascribing them to divine will.²⁴ Thus Adelard criticised those who feared thunder as a terrible portent. He warned 'the darkness that holds you, shrouds and leads into error all who are unsure about the order of things' and

²² Andrew of St Victor, *Commentary on Ezekiel*, quoted from B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1952), pp. 144, 388–9.

²³ Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society*, pp. 12–14. On the ever-growing tension in medieval thought between an increasingly regular nature and the notion of miracle see Daston and Parks, *Wonder*, pp. 109–21.

²⁴ For the early English 'scientific' tradition see Southern, *Robert Grosseteste*, pp. 83–107; A. C. Crombie, *Robert Grosseteste and the Origins of Experimental Science, 1100–1700* (London, 1953), pp. 1–43. And for Adelard himself see C. S. F. Burnett (ed.), *Adelard of Bath: an English Scientist and Arabist of the Early Twelfth Century* (London, 1987), esp. pp. 7–16; L. Cochrane, *Adelard of Bath: First English Scientist* (London, 1994), pp. 6–52.

admonished his reader to 'look more closely, consider the circumstances, propose causes, and you will wonder at the effects'.²⁵

Gerald of Wales betrays such influences in his voluminous writings. For him, many of nature's secrets were accessible to the mind. Gerald's critical approach was fashioned at the schools of Gloucester and Paris, where he trained in canon law, theology and logic, and later at Lincoln. On a superficial level, Gerald's learning looks unremarkable. Indeed, if one were to list the authorities of which Gerald was most fond, one might legitimately conclude that he was not unlike Orderic in his lines of thought about the world. But such a list would shroud considerable differences in the way these authorities were read and used by the monk of St Évrout and the secular from the marches. Gerald often reiterated established Augustinian arguments about the miraculous quality of the creation but as he turned from theory to the practice of writing about the world he began to part company with the traditional brands of history written in the cloister. Augustine's theology as monks such as Orderic read it rendered exploration of causes within the patterns of nature fruitless. But Gerald wanted to engage in precisely this sort of speculation: he was interested in the physical causes of things and believed that they could be apprehended through the senses. Nature was not so miraculous for Gerald and he created substantial space for discussion of its patterns and anomalies. In *Topographia Hibernica* Gerald explicitly distinguished wonderful works of nature from miraculous interventions of the creator and even divided up the narrative on this basis.²⁶ Gerald's Welsh and Irish works were also full of reflections about the causes of things. He discussed at length why the height of Ireland's land and its mild climate should cause it to be wet.²⁷ The spectacle of leaping salmon in the rivers of Wales and Ireland was dissected in similar fashion, Gerald observing that this behaviour may seem hard to believe but it is from the nature (*ex natura*) of this fish to perform such feats.²⁸ He was also reluctant to accept the beliefs of Welsh villagers who held that the groaning of a lake in winter was miraculous. Dismissing their claims, Gerald offered an alternative physical explanation, ascribing the noises to air trapped beneath its frozen surface and being violently released.²⁹

Gerald was not renouncing Augustine's conceptualisation of creation, but he was reading him in subtly different ways from many of his predecessors, attaching greater value to speculation about the natural

²⁵ Adelard of Bath, *Conversations with his Nephew: On the Same and the Different, Questions on Natural Science and On Birds*, ed. and trans. C. S. F. Burnett, Cambridge Medieval Classics 9 (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 202–5.

²⁶ GW, *TH*, p. 113. ²⁷ GW, *IK*, pp. 35–6. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–6.

order. This is most visible in a story allegedly told to Gerald by a priest named Elidyr. As a child the priest claimed to have gained access to a strange parallel world through a hole in a river bank in Pembrokeshire. The priest himself told Gerald the tale – which was also known to the local bishop – and was even able to recall elements of the language of the country which Gerald thought resembled Greek. Gerald handled the account with care, warning:

If scrupulous reader, you inquire about the truth of this account, I respond with Augustine that divine miracles are there to be wondered at, not disputed or discussed. If I reject it, I place a limit on God's power. If I affirm it, I presumptuously go beyond the bounds of credulity, and that I am not able to do.³⁰

He then added, 'as Augustine implied, I would put this story, and others of similar nature, if the circumstance should arise, among those things which cannot be rejected and yet which I cannot accept with any real conviction'.³¹ Gerald had great difficulty accommodating Elidyr's account using categories derived from human perspectives of nature and miracle and so we see him shifting position on what constituted 'nature'. He abandoned the pragmatic notion of nature as observable patterns and deviations as understood by man, falling back on the broad Augustinian idea of a transcendent nature identified with the will of the creator. But what is interesting here is Gerald's handling of testimony. Gerald was unwilling to accept the truth of the tale as it stood and was temporising between credulity and disbelief. If he had doubted the authority of the witness, then Gerald could have dismissed the story and avoided the need to invoke Augustine. His scepticism about the tale must therefore have had a different root. Objectively, nature may have been unknowable because it was only truly known by God who created it, but Elidyr's story reveals Gerald assessing testimony not just on the basis of the authority of the witness, but on the basis of expectations about the world derived from experience. In doing this, Gerald was adopting a strategy which avoided the immediate invocation of an incomprehensible God. This would therefore seem to be the exceptional story which proves the general rule of Gerald's pragmatic approach to causation. Only when the quest for a 'secondary' cause was exhausted did he 'have recourse to miracles', and even then he left testimony finely poised against doubt.

What led men such as Gerald to move away from traditional Augustinian perspectives to seek the causes of things in the world?

³⁰ GW, *IK*, p. 78. See also the account of a werewolf where Gerald similarly invoked Augustine in GW, *EH*, p. 5.

³¹ GW, *IK*, p. 78.

Robert Bartlett has ascribed this inclination to Platonic and Neo-Platonic influences long embedded in Augustine's writing and in the framework of Christian theology.³² Gerald certainly drew out these strands of Augustinian thought in ways that others did not, but why he did so is not easy to apprehend. Perhaps the most economical explanation is that he read Augustine differently because of formative experiences in the schools where insulation from the New Platonisms would not have been easy. Given that he spent ten years in Paris, it is especially unlikely that Gerald remained untouched by such developments.³³ Indeed, there is some evidence that he dabbled directly in Platonic cosmologies: one of his writings, *Symbolum Electorum*, preserves fragments of a *Cosmographia* which was broadly similar in conception to the tract of the same name by a leading exponent of Platonism, Bernard Silvestris.³⁴

Other schoolmen who had received a similar training to Gerald worked their way towards a similar vision of nature. Among them was Gervase of Tilbury, a member of the next generation of court-focused scholars, writing in the early thirteenth century. Although English by birth, he served the German emperor, Otto IV, for whom he produced his great work, *Otia Imperialia*. Gervase was cosmopolitan, widely travelled through England, France, Germany and Sicily, and his book incorporated wonder stories from all of these places.³⁵ He is important for our purposes because he articulated an especially crisp conception of the natural order, distinguishing clearly between marvels within nature and miracles which transcended it. He also shared with Gerald a sense that there was a realm of natural secrets which could, and should, be demystified through the exercise of reason. Thus Gervase freely offered up naturalising accounts of the sea; the influence of the moon on tides; the bodily humours; how water evaporates and turns into air; how clouds came to be formed and the causes of winds and earthquakes.³⁶ He even worked out to his own satisfaction that fauns and satyrs were not spirits but 'corporeal wild beasts' because he knew that a dead specimen of such a being was sent to the Emperor Constantine packed up in salt.³⁷ He knew that things were salted because they decomposed, argued on this basis that this did not sound like an airy body, and concluded that 'these creatures are therefore more

³² R. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146-1223* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 128-33.

³³ On the schools and the learning of English scholars see G.R. Evans, 'The Influence of Quadrivium Studies in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Schools', *Journal of Medieval History*, 1 (1975), pp. 151-64; R. W. Hunt, 'English Learning in the Late Twelfth Century', *TRHS*, 4th series, 19 (1936), pp. 19-42.

³⁴ Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, pp. 127-33. ³⁵ GT, pp. xxv-xxxviii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 346-7, 44-7, 52-3, 76-7, 338-9. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

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properly considered animal bodies (*corpora bestialia*) than airy spirits (*spiritus aerei*).³⁸

The novelty of Gervase's approach is also clearly visible in a series of observations about wonders which he had quarried from Augustine's *City of God*. The substance of the discussion was prefixed with an interpretative apparatus which Augustine himself would not have recognised. Gervase noted that from wonder 'arise two things, miracles (*miracula*) and marvels (*mirabilia*)' and explained that 'we generally call things miracles which, being preternatural (*preter naturam*), we ascribe to divine power, as when a virgin gives birth, when Lazarus is raised from the dead, or when diseased limbs are made whole again'.³⁹ In contrast, 'we call those things marvels which are beyond our comprehension, even though they are natural (*naturalia*) – in fact the inability to explain why a thing is so constitutes a marvel'.⁴⁰ Both Gervase and Gerald of Wales, in carving up the created order in this way, opened up space in which reason could operate and in so doing they also disentangled much that was wondrous from the skein of the miraculous and providential.

William of Newburgh and naturalising explanations

A training in the schools and awareness of the New Platonisms may have served as a stimulus for many writers to shake themselves free from symbolic readings of the world but such exposure was not a necessary precondition. The larger cultural shifts in comprehension of nature, identified by Murray, help to explain why historical writers who were not operating in the currents of Platonist thought might write about the natural order as a semi-autonomous sphere and hypothesise about cause and effect within it. William of Newburgh is perhaps the best example of such a writer. In stark contrast to the showily self-advertising Gerald, we know little about him. He was born in 1136, died probably in 1198 and seems to have spent most of his life as an Augustinian canon in the house at Newburgh on the lowland edge of the North Yorkshire moors.⁴¹ Again unlike Gerald, William seems not to have travelled widely, though his calling as a canon would probably have brought him into close contact with local society around

³⁸ *Ibid.* ³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 558–9. On Gervase's interest in 'nature' see also GT, lvii–lix. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ The *Historia* was commissioned at the behest of Abbot Ernald of Rievaulx who approached William because the Cistercian Rule restricted the writing of history in Cistercian houses. See WN, I, p. 3; A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c.550–c.1307* (London 1974), p. 263.

his house.⁴² Such a supposition might be strengthened by his intimate acquaintance with the detailed affairs of the north, though recent work by John Gillingham also suggests a heavy debt to another northern writer, Roger of Howden, in William's accumulation of detail.⁴³

William of Newburgh certainly developed in a more intellectually sheltered environment than Gerald. His great work, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, betrays a narrower learning and novel influences from the schools are not to be detected in it. Thus in many ways William's writing echoed that of his traditionalist peers. He shared with them the notion that events in the world might be pregnant with meaning but drew out moral lessons only when the cases were clear cut. Similarly, William saw divine and demonic forces playing freely over the world; the Bible, Augustine and other Church Fathers guided him in his efforts to discern their specific operations. But he was also a sharp analyst committed to the study of causation.⁴⁴ For William the miraculous and mystical were not the first resorts in framing explanations for the wondrous things he encountered and he was reluctant to take refuge in symbolic readings of history. Indeed he seems to have believed that a great deal that was apparently extraordinary could be explained through observation and the exercise of reason. Speaking of *prodigia* and *signa*, William contended that 'I call things of this nature wonderful (*mira*), not merely on account of their rarity, but because they have a hidden cause (*ratio*).'⁴⁵ In speaking of 'hidden causes', William implied that other causes were accessible. By this he did not simply mean that it was possible to use scripture to label events miraculous or demonic; he suggested that reason might be able to assign physical explanations to certain kinds of events. He put this idea into practice on a number of occasions. For example, when William, archbishop of York, died, William of Newburgh pointed to signs of foul play, such as the dead man's blackened teeth which he thought suggestive of poison.⁴⁶ Similarly, when some Gilbertine canons of Malton died suddenly while working in a lime pit, William noted with characteristic

⁴² On William's written sources see WN, I, pp. xxvi–xxx. He must also have exploited contacts with other houses: for example Antonia Gransden has suggested that information on both East Anglia and Norway came to William from his contacts with Bury. See Gransden, *Historical Writing c.550–c.1307*, p. 267; also B. Dickins, 'A Yorkshire Chronicler (William of Newburgh)', *Yorkshire Dialect Society*, 5 (1934), pp. 15–26.

⁴³ See J. Gillingham, 'Two Yorkshire Historians Compared: Roger of Howden and William of Newburgh', *Haskins Society Journal*, 22 (2003), pp. 15–37; J. Gillingham, 'William of Newburgh and Emperor Henry VI', in W. Koch, A. Schmid and W. Volkert (eds.), *Auxilia Historica: Festschrift für Peter Acht zum 90 Geburtstag* (Munich, 2001), pp. 51–71.

⁴⁴ He was, for example, one of few medieval writers to see through Geoffrey of Monmouth's invented history. See WN, I, pp. 11–18, 166; Gransden, *Historical Writing c.550–c.1307*, pp. 264–6.

⁴⁵ WN, I, pp. 84–5 ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–6, 79–81.

Thinking about the supernatural

caution that the clothes of one of them were tattered ‘as if rent by the hands of some evil assailant’. William was wary of the ‘supernatural’ explanation, probing the physical causes instead and illuminating his thoughts with a second similar case. This concerned workers who died suddenly whilst digging a well:

But this is *not so wonderful* (*non adeo mirum est*) for a cause (*ratio*) for it may possibly be given. Perhaps the bottom of this well contained a hidden vein of quicksilver, or some other noxious matter, which as it is believed, upon being laid open by the diggers, emitted a foul and pestilential vapour, which surprising all sense, would in a moment put an end to their existence.⁴⁷

Here William was agreeing with Gervase of Tilbury’s analysis: the discovery of a *ratio* for an event would ensure that it *non adeo mirum est*. Where events were found to have ‘ordinary’ rather than ‘extraordinary’ causes, William was correspondingly less likely to read any special significance into them. Only when human intellect failed, and causes within nature could not be found, did William appeal to an incipient idea of the supernatural and begin to ascribe a special meaning to the event.

Hence, despite their very different intellectual formations, the approaches of William of Newburgh on one hand and Gerald of Wales and Gervase of Tilbury on the other were not so radically different in their workings or outcomes. Although the cosmology of Gerald and Gervase grew out of the schools and that of William evolved from acute perception and experience of the world, each reached similar destinations: an apprehension of nature’s essential regularity and intelligibility which restricted the scope of the wondrous and gave that which remained a sharper definition. In pursuing this approach all three men gently advanced the cause of desacralisation because, just as the Cistercian critics feared, it was proving that much more difficult, in the way they wrote about the world, to see the creator’s hand at work in the spreading ordinariness.

Richard of Devizes and scepticism

Both Gerald of Wales and William of Newburgh marked out a space within which physical or human explanations were possible.⁴⁸ Yet

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 498–9.

⁴⁸ A similar trend is visible in other chronicles from Normandy. Here Leah Shopkow observed that William of Jumièges was inclined to offer explanations of events in terms of human agency before he turned to miraculous or demonic interpretations. This contrasted sharply with the earlier work of Dudo of St Quentin where miracle was a much more pervasive mode of explanation. See Shopkow, *History and Community*, pp. 196, 223–4.

awareness of nature's regularity and convictions about secondary causation seem to have encouraged one chronicler to go further with the business of chipping away at the extraordinary and rendering the marvellous mundane. Richard of Devizes, a Benedictine monk of St Swithun's at Winchester, also writing in the last quarter of the twelfth century, shared with William of Newburgh a suspicion that establishing the ordinariness of an event drained it of special significance. His writing focused on political and ecclesiastical narrative, turning on precise observations, quantification of all things which lent themselves to measurement and intermittent but astringent political and moral criticism.⁴⁹ Such traits led Nancy Partner to brand him 'more a merchant than a scholar' and Richard's historical writing is indeed radically different in content and style from the analysis of the past expounded by his fellow Benedictine, Orderic, writing fifty years before him.⁵⁰

Richard's brisk tone and business-like style may owe much to the growing readiness of monks in houses like St Swithun's to apply reason in practical ways to everyday problems. In particular, during the twelfth century, the preponderant place of writing as a sacred thing was progressively undercut in the everyday lives of monks by a need to use the written word pragmatically, to order a broader range of monastic affairs.⁵¹ It should not therefore surprise if habits of mind formed in the handling of law books, account rolls, land charters or court records began to infuse writing about the past. 'Administrative history', which placed everyday business and human action at the centre of the narrative found a supreme expression in Jocelin of Brakelond's house-history of Bury St Edmunds which so richly evoked the ordinary affairs of the monastery.⁵² Richard, in tackling the established fare of high politics and church affairs, was more conservative than Jocelin in his choice of subject-matter, but his handling of that material was in one respect more radical, informed as it was by a concern with localised, reasoned explanations and a pragmatic approach to causation.

Instances of divine intervention and explanations in terms of God's providence are not absent from Richard's writing but are rare and tend to conform to a pattern. Bluntly put, in Richard's universe the creator left things to run their own course, involving himself from time to time in the affairs of his black monks and especially their house of St Swithun.

⁴⁹ See RD, pp. 15–16, 24, 28. ⁵⁰ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, pp. 152–3.

⁵¹ M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Oxford, 1979), rev. edn (Oxford, 1993); B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1982).

⁵² Jocelin of Brakelond, *Cronica Jocelini de Brakelonda de Rebus Gestis Samsonis Abbatis Monasterii Sancti Edmundi, The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond Concerning the Acts of Samson, Abbot of the Monastery of St Edmund*, ed. and trans. H. E. Butler, Nelson Medieval Texts (London, 1949).

Malefactors were punished. Monks who tried to advance themselves by simoniacal or other unjust means were struck down by God. Likewise a monk who co-operated with Hugh Nonant, bishop of Coventry, in his replacement of the monks of that cathedral with secular canons met an untimely end.⁵³ Yet in turning to the larger world the miraculous dissolved, providentialist interpretations melted away and Richard dwelt instead on natural and human explanations for events. So, unusually among his peers, he did not ascribe the collapse of the Third Crusade to the crusaders' sins. He pointed instead to the high mortality caused by extreme weather, shortage of rations and low morale. He also stressed that the Saracens were able to gather 'fresh troops from various places' who 'were accustomed to the climate'.⁵⁴ On other occasions, Richard explained events in terms of the personal qualities of leaders but, again, the guiding hand of providence is absent. The victory at Famagosta, for example, was not to be explained in terms of the mysterious workings of divine will but by quality of leadership for 'the English would have been defeated on that day if they had not been fighting under Richard'.⁵⁵

Yet Richard's most startling use of such pragmatic modes of interpretation appeared in his handling of portents and signs. Here his epistemological pragmatism seems to have hardened into a form of scepticism about the scope of providential explanation. Tackling the subject of eclipses, Richard noted that many 'marvelled greatly that, although the sun was not darkened by any clouds, in the middle of the day it shone with less than ordinary brightness'. But he mockingly rejected such reactions as credulous. They were entertained only by 'those who do not understand the causes of things'. He went on to argue that 'those who study the working of the world . . . say that certain defects of the sun and moon do not signify anything'.⁵⁶ In sum, in contrast to most twelfth-century chroniclers, Richard was more interested in the causes of things than the meaning of things. For him, as for William of Newburgh, the span of human reason and the scope of wonder were inversely related, the discovery of causes being a powerful solvent of wonderment. In Richard's history, the patterned and predictable character of so much in the world tended to drain special meaning even from events which others found extraordinary. The conviction that providence worked through the detail of human affairs and natural events was itself a casualty of such a demystifying approach.

An examination of Richard of Devizes confirms inferences drawn from studying Gerald of Wales and William of Newburgh. Some historical

⁵³ RD, pp. 18–19, 73. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 73–4. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35. See also Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, pp. 143–79.

writers may have been propelled by their training in the schools into rethinking the traditional Augustinian vision of the world and according greater status to sense experience and reason in their cosmologies. Yet such exposure to new thinking from the schools was not a *sine qua non* for the reinterpretation of Augustinianism in the context of historical writing. Indeed, if the idea of a 'regular nature' was invented in the twelfth century, as Alexander Murray has suggested, then the raw materials for this invention were not available in the schools alone. William of Newburgh and Richard of Devizes betray no direct influence of the new learning and developed their own naturalistic empiricism out of experience of the world. Their achievement also raises wider issues. Among the chroniclers, William and Richard cut unusual figures and yet, if we look at chroniclers' expectations of audience responses, it becomes apparent that such perspectives were more widespread than a simple examination of authorial stances might suggest. Even those who offered a providentialist interpretation of the past seem to have anticipated the objections of audiences who privileged physical and naturalistic explanations to a greater degree.

THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE CHRONICLE'S AUDIENCE
IN THE MIRROR OF THE TEXT

The fears of the Cistercian champions of symbolic approaches to knowledge of the world were also heightened because 'desacralising' thought was not only the product of school-based speculation. It could also be generated by direct experience of the world itself, cultivated by practical rather than scholarly wisdom. As Alexander Murray has shown, the world was in the twelfth century increasingly subject to the will of men who not only perceived order in it, but used practical knowledge to impose organisation on it.⁵⁷ The chroniclers themselves attest to these processes as they chart the march of new technologies. William of Malmesbury described how drainage works and new causeways around Ely allowed communities to domesticate inhospitable fens and subordinate them to the agricultural economy because 'today men, being cleverer, have tamed nature'.⁵⁸ More pointedly, Wace noted that the many mysteries of the forest of Brecheliant in Brittany had vanished before the encroaching ploughs of peasants who 'destroyed all' as they brought land into cultivation.⁵⁹ Speculative and practical reason alike were working to reduce the world

⁵⁷ Murray, *Reason and Society*, pp. 111–16. ⁵⁸ WM, *GP*, pp. 324–5.

⁵⁹ Wace, *The History of the Norman People: Wace's Roman de Rou*, trans. G. S. Burgess with notes by G. S. Burgess and E. Van Houts (Woodbridge, 2004), p. 162.

to system and order and any understanding of creation as a grand and meaning-rich mystery found itself attacked on two fronts.

In this context, the very intensity of the moralising, the vigour with which the wondrous working of providence was sometimes explained, can be understood in a different way. Orderic, and others like him who championed the pervasiveness of the divine in the world, needed to argue their case against others who trusted experiential and pragmatic knowledge more than they should. Perturbations running through medieval chronicles suggest that, even among the ecclesiastical communities who formed the first and most obvious audiences for these texts, there were misgivings about the pervasiveness of divine providence in the world.

A particularly striking instance is found in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum*. William, a Benedictine writing in the period c.1125–40, shared a similar view of the world to that of Orderic and his thoughts were informed by a similar species of twelfth-century Augustinianism cultivated in the cloister.⁶⁰ Yet, in presenting the story of William Rufus's death, and that of the signs which attended it, he also reveals the limits of his audience's tolerance for such ways of explaining uncanny events. He felt no need to justify talk of terrible dreams and prophecies which swept the court before the king's fateful hunting trip to the New Forest, tales he shared with many other chroniclers. But, in tackling the claim that the collapse of a tower over Rufus's grave at Winchester was a divine sign, he became nervous. In the two earliest versions of *Gesta Regum*, Malmesbury reached for a moralising interpretation of this event: the collapse was due to Rufus's sins, 'for it was wrong to inter, in such a sacred spot, him who had been his whole life wanton and lecherous and even died without receiving the last rites'.⁶¹ But, in later recensions, Malmesbury revised his judgement dramatically, noticing that the tower's fall 'gave rise to much comment, which I refrain from repeating lest I be thought to lend an ear to idle talk'. William's new position rested not on providence but on pragmatic explanation grounded in physical causes. He argued that 'the fabric [of the tower] might easily have collapsed through unsound construction, even had he never been buried there'.⁶² It seems very likely that real or anticipated criticism from the audience, in which churchmen must

⁶⁰ On Malmesbury's life see R. Darlington, *Anglo-Norman Historians* (London, 1947), pp. 11–15; WM, GR, I, p. xvii; R. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 1–38. For his other writings see H. Farmer, 'William of Malmesbury's Life and Works', *JEH*, 13 (1962), pp. 39–54. On his prodigious learning see WM, GR, pp. xvi–lxvi; Thomson, *Malmesbury*, pp. 7, 39–75, 197–207; H. Farmer, 'William of Malmesbury's *Commentary on Lamentations*', *Studia Monastica*, 4 (1962), pp. 283–311.

⁶¹ WM, GR, I, pp. 574–5. These words appeared in the T and A texts of the work.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 575. These words appear in the C and B texts.

have figured prominently, encouraged William to abandon the miraculous and providential for more mundane physical explanation. His shifting position also indicates that 'providential' and 'pragmatic' explanations were at least to some extent in tension, the discovery of causes robbing an event of its special import.

Even Orderic, for all his attachment to divine action as a means of historical explanation, was aware that among his monastic audience some would question his expansive claims. On a crude level, this is indicated by Orderic's use of terms. He may have held that all creation was miraculous and mysterious but, when he moved from theological gloss to descriptions of events, the word miracle was reserved for the most unusual acts of the creator. Orderic even lamented that miracles were drying up in the present age.⁶³ Orderic's sensitivity to the frames of reference among his readers and hearers is also disclosed in more subtle ways. He sometimes framed his wonder tales with phrases such as *incredibile non est*, aware that among his audience some might reject a tale precisely because it was not credible, because it contradicted experience. This awareness is apparent also in Orderic's handling of testimony. While he adopted the same testimonial criteria for wonderful and 'non-wonderful' events, he was much more assiduous in stacking up authorities when dealing with the former, taking care to produce plausible witnesses (usually churchmen), summoning Biblical and patristic authorities, even pointing to fragments of physical evidence.⁶⁴ All of this stood in sharp contrast to accounts of politics and ecclesiastical affairs where Orderic seldom felt the need to go into much detail about sources or offer full authentication of a story. That *signa*, *prodigia*, *mira* and *miracula* were thought to need more proofs, or proofs of a more compelling kind, points again to audiences, even audiences of fellow monks, who had a robust sense of nature's essential regularity and needed convincing that in any particular instance God had intervened in creation in an unusual way.

If monks took such a view, the conviction that divine intervention was the exception rather than the rule of human experience could probably only have had a stronger hold on the imaginations of those who lived and worked in the world. We can see this if we examine texts written with an eye on aristocratic audiences. The first of these, the *Gesta Guillelmi* of William of Poitiers, is a complicated case because it worked divine

⁶³ OV, III, p. 214.

⁶⁴ On the use of oral sources by chroniclers see E. Van Houts, 'Genre Aspects of the Use of Oral Information in Medieval Historiography', in B. Frank, T. Haye and D. Tophinke (eds.), *Gattungen mittelalterlichen Schriftlichkeit* (Tubingen, 1998), pp. 297–311; K. Quirk, 'Men, Women and Miracles in Normandy, 1050–1150', in Van Houts (ed.), *Medieval Memories*, pp. 53–71.

providence liberally into the mix of explanation. In describing William the Conqueror's victory at Hastings he blended providence and heroism to make Norman knights the instruments of divine operations.⁶⁵ God answered the Conqueror's prayers by sending a following wind to carry the Norman invasion fleet to English shores.⁶⁶ So confident was the duke of divine favour that he was even willing to decide the issue of the crown in single combat with Harold (in order, the chronicler claims, to avoid the shedding of Christian blood). Harold, meanwhile, deprived of divine aid by his oath-breaking, misguidedly placed faith in his superior earthly forces and so spurned the offer.⁶⁷

Yet William of Poitiers also added other more worldly explanations for the Norman victory at Hastings and these sometimes pushed the workings of providence into a poor second place as mechanisms of historical interpretation. His upbringing, career and audience ensured that the values and accumulated experience of a warrior elite were kept firmly before his eyes and these also found expression in his writing.⁶⁸ He was born into a minor aristocratic family and trained initially for war, serving for some time as a knight before he entered the church and rose in its ranks as a secular clerk. Even in his ecclesiastical duties, he was barely insulated from the world, acting as a ducal chaplain and subsequently enjoying promotion to the rank of archdeacon.⁶⁹ From such roots sprang a willingness to write in a less exalted way about the battlefield and to reckon more pragmatically on the martial prowess of the combatants, or the impact of terrain and equipment, on the outcome of fighting. William tended to fall back on this mode of explanation when neither providence nor heroism offered a politically palatable explanation for events on the field. Hence, early in the battle of Hastings, Norman reverses were accounted for by superior English numbers, their possession of the high ground and the effectiveness of their weapons 'which easily penetrated shields and other protections'.⁷⁰ Similarly, when the day was almost won and a detachment of Normans was cut down in the so-called Malfosse incident, William explained that the English 'found a chance to renew battle, thanks to a broken rampart and labyrinth of ditches' and that there

⁶⁵ WP, pp. xvii, xx–xxi. William of Poitiers made much of the Conqueror's piety, including his deep devotions during mass and trust in holy relics, and contrasted this with the sacrilegious oath-breaking of Harold. See WP, pp. 124–5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11. ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 122–3.

⁶⁸ On the worldly concerns visible in the work – for example interest in war, heroism, duties of lords and vassals see Shopkow, *History and Community*, p. 228.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153; WP, pp. xv–xvi.

⁷⁰ William was well equipped to talk authoritatively about war. The *Gesta* betrays detailed knowledge of Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* and some grasp of Vegetius. See WP, pp. xxi–xxiii.

'some of the noblest Normans fell, for their valour was of no avail on such unfavourable ground'.⁷¹ In these passages, the general mode of explanation which blended divine providence, ducal virtue and Norman valour was briefly suspended in favour of 'pragmatic' explanations which better served the politics of the narrative. William's primary task was to make his account of battle conform to the self-image of the Norman warrior elite who styled themselves as heroic, virtuous and possessed of a special place in God's scheme. Where such powerful ideas operated, tensions between providential and pragmatic registers were easily buried in the larger project of celebrating and reinforcing Norman identity.

Further passages in *Gesta Guillelmi* help us to see more clearly how providential and pragmatic registers of explanation may have co-existed in Norman court culture. Passages of hortatory pre-battle rhetoric put into the mouth of the duke by William of Poitiers are useful here because they were written with an eye on a court acquainted with war and interested in celebrating a particular idealised image of it.⁷² Again, the language of providence, romantic heroism and pragmatic calculation are present but they lie in a different relationship to each other from that found elsewhere in the *Gesta*. In one such episode, while awaiting the arrival of Harold's forces, Duke William rejects the practical solution of fortification to offset the greater English numbers and melds Norman heroism and the prospect of divine aid into an argument for a more daring offensive response:

I will not take refuge in the shelter of ditch or walls, but I will fight with Harold as soon as possible; nor do I lack confidence in the courage of my men to fight and destroy him and his men, if God so wills, even if I had only 10,000 men of the quality of the 60,000 I have bought with me.⁷³

A second, longer passage, where Duke William was presented addressing the army as a whole, is perhaps more telling. He began by exhorting the troops to arms and reminded them:

that in many and great dangers they had always come out victorious under his leadership ... He reminded them all of their fatherland, of their noble exploits and their great fame ... If they fought like men, they would have victory, honour and wealth. If not they would let themselves either be slaughtered or

⁷¹ WP, pp. 138–9.

⁷² On this subject see also J. R. E. Bliese, 'Rhetoric and Morale: a Study of Battle Orations from the Central Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History*, 15 (1989), pp. 201–26; J. R. E. Bliese, 'St Cuthbert and St Neot's Help in War: Visions and Exhortations', *Haskins Society Journal*, 7 (1995), pp. 39–62.

⁷³ WP, pp. 116–17.

captured to be mocked by the most cruel enemies, not to mention that they would bring on themselves perpetual ignominy.⁷⁴

He then warned them not to be ‘terrified by the number’ of the forces ranged against them for the English had often been defeated in the past, ‘overthrown by enemy arms’.⁷⁵ In all of this, the mix of practical wisdom and secular aristocratic values is striking, but not so striking as the absence of trust in providence. This comes only at the end of the speech where the duke explains that ‘men who are inexpert in warfare could easily be crushed by a few, especially since hope from on high was not lacking in their cause’.⁷⁶ This final argument stands out against the grain of the address but, perhaps more importantly, even here the clinching point is that the English are inexpert in arms: the prospect of divine aid is offered simply as an extra shortening of the odds on eventual Norman victory.

William of Poitiers’s representations are not isolated cases. Henry of Huntingdon, another secular churchman with feet firmly in the world, put similar battle rhetoric in the mouths of noblemen. Like William of Poitiers, he elided prowess and providence when recounting Robert of Gloucester’s oration to his men on the eve of battle at Lincoln in 1141. According to this, Robert claimed that his cause was a just one because he battled against a ‘most unfaithful king’ (*infidissimi regis*) who broke ‘sacred oaths’ (*sacramenta*) of peace sworn to the Empress Matilda. In consequence, ‘the One who judges ... will by no means abandon those seeking to right a wrong’. And yet, in Henry’s words, Robert also felt the need to stiffen waverers among the aristocratic ranks with a less devout and noble sentiment: that speedy escape from the battle through the marshes would not be possible and so ‘here you must either conquer or die’.⁷⁷ They must, of necessity, take refuge in their prowess. Turning to the other camp, Henry of Huntingdon had Baldwin fitzGilbert of Clare offer on behalf of King Stephen a briefer pre-battle exhortation to the troops which addressed the three things which soldiers needed to hold in their minds before combat. These were: the justice of their cause, the numbers of their forces and the prowess of the army. Yet Baldwin tellingly suggests that the former mattered lest the men fear that their souls be in any peril, rather than because divine providence would turn the battle.⁷⁸ In both of these passages, earthly calculation plays a bigger role than the prospect of divine intervention, but Baldwin’s words, in particular, spell out that earthly victory turned on human rather than divine agency.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 124–7. ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 126–7. ⁷⁶ *Ibid.* ⁷⁷ HH, pp. 726–9. ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 732–7.

History and the supernatural in medieval England

Other evidence of the prosecution of war in the eleventh and twelfth centuries also bears out the words of these two chronicles. Efforts to gain supernatural aid through acts of benefaction or restitution (for those who had wronged holy church), the mobilisation of relics, parading of patronal banners and intoning of prayers were elements integral to pre-battle preparation, but they were components in much larger considerations. Prayer mattered before a battle to ease the soul and to shorten the odds in one's favour but it was only at this level that it was expected to have an impact on the outcome. After the battle the tone might alter because a pattern could be discerned (or invented) with the benefit of hindsight. Events might now be set in a providential framework: victory could be explained as a work of providence and thus legitimised; defeat could be interpreted as a punishment for sins. But these were glosses retrospectively applied. They were probably not the prime considerations of warriors as they marched into battle: such practical men put their trust first in earthly rather than celestial things.⁷⁹

When Bernard of Clairvaux worried that learned churchmen in the schools were preoccupied with exploring nature's regularity, he objected because these new ways of thinking intellectualised existing intuitions born out of experience of the world. This instinctive awareness of nature's essential order was already something of a problem in the eyes of authors such as Orderic Vitalis, a man not shaped by the debates of the schools. Orderic acknowledged that miraculous happenings and apparitions of demons were extraordinary rarities, standing out against the grain of ordinary experience. He also knew, though he clearly did not like the idea, that 'ordinary experience' was not, for most people, seen to be textured in its intimate detail by the miraculous working of the creator. This was a view he was seeking to challenge by writing a chronicle which showed how God was at work in history. But for most in medieval society experience continued to teach a different lesson. Divine will as a force governing the operation of politics, constraining the outcome of battles and working in ordinary lives was the exceptional explanation rather than the rule. Where people generally *did* identify the divine at work in the world was in precisely those rare moments when the accustomed course of nature was suspended; when miracles occurred, signs appeared or demons materialised. All of these things were thought to happen in medieval society, leaving traces in masses of sources across a wide range of genres. They were shared elements of belief. And yet, as we shall see, these beliefs could be articulated and understood in subtly different ways.

⁷⁹ M. Strickland, *War and Chivalry: the Conduct and Perception of War in England and Normandy, 1066–1217* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 58–69.

Thinking about the supernatural

ELEMENTS OF BELIEF

Miracles

‘Miracle’ was, of course, a shared idea within this general currency of beliefs, but the varied uses of the word conform to the pattern that we have already identified. Orderic used the word miraculous liberally to connote God’s operations in the world; so too did his contemporary, William of Malmesbury, who wrote freely about the many ‘miracles’ of the Italian countryside, none of which were interruptions of nature’s customary course.⁸⁰ Free and easy use of this term followed from the conviction that God’s hand was to be seen in both the regularities of nature and the aberrations. But for most, miracle had a narrower and more sharply defined meaning. It denoted simply those moments when God intervened directly and the anticipated patterns of nature were confounded.⁸¹ Augustine had worried about the spiritual consequences of this ‘narrow’ appreciation of the miraculous and suggested that, for the great majority of the faithful, inured by rhythms and patterns to which they had become accustomed, God would be visible not generally in nature but only in those rare manifestations of power which excited wonderment.⁸² Gervase of Tilbury agreed about this danger and reworked Augustine’s ideas for a later audience. He held that:

when anything strange is observed we seize on it, partly because of the inversion of the course of nature (*cursus naturalis*) which surprises us, in part because of our ignorance of the cause (*ratio*), whose working is a mystery to us, and partly because of seeing our expectation cheated in unfamiliar circumstances of which we lack proper understanding.⁸³

Such a perception of the miraculous had been encouraged among society at large since the conversions by preachers who presented Christ and the saints as powerful wonder-workers.⁸⁴ Here the idea of unexpected intervention fused with the notion that Christ and the saints could supply worldly aid *in extremis*, meeting social needs which ranged from raising the dead and healing the sick to aiding warriors in battle.⁸⁵ Such apprehensions of miracle continued to dominate in central medieval society,

⁸⁰ WM, GR, I, pp. 288–9.

⁸¹ See P. A. Sigal, *L’Homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale* (XIe–XIIIe siècle) (Paris, 1985); Ward, *Miracles*, pp. 3–32; Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, pp. 17–24.

⁸² See Ward, *Miracles*, p. 3. ⁸³ GT, pp. 558–9.

⁸⁴ On this point see B. Ward, ‘Miracles and History: a Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories used by Bede’, in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London, 1976), pp. 70–6.

⁸⁵ See K. Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill, 1996), pp. 72–89.

being especially visible in the miracle collections which were, in essence, created out of that 'narrow' idea of the miraculous. These texts traded on the wondrousness of saintly deeds measured against the mundane rhythms of daily experience in which the divine was not seen to be at work. Attracted by such claims, pilgrims flocked in significant numbers to countless small shrines hoping that the anticipated workings of nature would be marvellously suspended. We might take as an example the twelfth-century cult of St Modwenna at Burton. Modwenna was, in many respects, an unremarkable saint who healed an unexceptional range of ills and worked relatively low-grade wonders. Her chief propagandist, Geoffrey, abbot of Burton, was at pains to dramatise the extraordinariness of all these works nonetheless. He told how Modwenna worked wonders *contra naturam*, including one occasion when she was seen to make water flow up hill 'through the power of God and contrary to nature'.⁸⁶ Similarly, the saint preserved, 'in a marvellous fashion', the contents of an open wine-flask which fell overboard from a boat. Geoffrey mused that:

it is natural if a glass of liquid . . . falls into water that it goes to the bottom [and] . . . the vessel we are discussing fell into the water full of wine and went down to the bottom naturally but, contrary to nature, floated on the water not naturally but miraculously (*non naturaliter sed mirabiliter*) through the merit of the virgin to whom it had been vowed.⁸⁷

Geoffrey's language, and his homespun wisdom about patterns discernible in nature, illustrate the tendency of *miracula*-writers to play up the orderliness of the world as a foil for some rather modest wonders. This point seems telling. Geoffrey would have written up the miracles with an eye on audiences inside and outside the cloister. He must have thought this rhetorical strategy a good one, anticipating in his readers and hearers a strong sense of nature's essential regularity which he could exploit in order to dramatise Modwenna's power. In this he was in no way exceptional among hagiographers. That his tactics were so widely used indicates that among the broader audiences at which the hagiographer pitched his promotional pieces, the 'narrow' idea of miracle which Augustine had feared was emphatically the dominant one of the central middle ages.

⁸⁶ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, ed. and trans. R. Bartlett, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 2004), pp. 58–9.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 138–41.

This more circumscribed sense of the divine in the world had ramifications for perceptions of *signa* because the sense of a patterned, ordered nature threw signs into sharper relief and ensured that anomalies in the course of nature, especially those in the heavens, excited wonder and attracted much attention. Scripture also nourished such responses. The author of the *Gesta Stephani*, most probably the Cluniac bishop, Robert of Lewes, paralleled signs in his own day with a host of Old Testament portents: Moabites seeing redness in the skies, fiery battle-lines clashing in the heavens,⁸⁸ the rending of Saul's mantle, the ten pieces taken by Jeroboam signalling his rule over the ten tribes of Israel, and the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast.⁸⁹ In this particular field it was not Augustine himself who shaped the thinking of twelfth-century churchmen (for Augustine, as we have seen, was queasy about attaching too much significance to wonder). Rather it was Isidore of Seville's modified reading of the great doctor which proved influential. Isidore contended that 'portents and omens, monsters and prodigies are so called because they appear to portend, foretell, show and predict future things ... For God wishes to signify the future through defects in things which are born, as through dreams and prophecies, by which he forewarns and signifies to peoples or individuals a misfortune which is to come.'⁹⁰ God, in other words, exploited the frailties and limitations of human awareness to communicate his purposes.

This view of signs seems to have been so deeply embedded in twelfth-century historical discourse that few authors felt the need to articulate it, still less to defend it. The schematic earlier annals of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle were seeded with wondrous happenings which possessed an only half-elucidated relationship to political events. This tendency to describe signs without fully explaining their implications was also manifest in many twelfth-century writings. A rare instance of fuller exposition is in the *Gesta Stephani*, where we learn that 'a cloud of glowing sparks' illumined the night sky and portended the devastation of Northumbria through battle and wasting. The author added that the 'supreme architect of the universe, though invisible, yet condescends kindly to our ignorance and instructs us visibly about the future'.⁹¹ Here was the gist of the

⁸⁸ *Gesta Stephani Regis Anglorum*, ed. K. R. Potter, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1976), pp. 50–1. Cf. II Kings 3:22–3; II Maccabees 5:2.

⁸⁹ *Gesta Stephani*, pp. 52–3. Cf. I Samuel 15:27–8; I Kings 11:31; Daniel 5:5.

⁹⁰ Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum siue Originum*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911), II, cap. 3.

⁹¹ *Gesta Stephani*, pp. 50–1. On the author see F. Ramsey, 'Robert of Lewes', in R. Gameson and H. Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 251–63.

big idea that the creator intervened wondrously in his creation to encourage 'mortal men to become more humble towards God', shaking them out of their complacency by subverting their expectations about the natural order.

The range of events recurrently identified as *signa* in chronicles was considerable. Almost any unusual event was capable of a portentous reading. Solar and lunar phenomena (comets, bloodmoons, meteors, eclipses) and adverse weather (thunderstorms, gales, floods, droughts) were the most common portents mentioned by chroniclers.⁹² Roger of Howden offered an especially vivid story of a shower of blood on the Isle of Wight so intense that 'linen clothes which were hung out upon the hedges were stained with the bloody rain, just as though they had been dipped in blood'.⁹³ Monstrous births and the discovery of evidence of monsters – such as giants' teeth and a massive skull found in England and discussed at length by Ralph of Coggeshall – were mentioned more rarely than astral and weather events but signalled the same kind of impending dangers.⁹⁴ Beneath this layer of established portents lurked a host of other unusual phenomena which were susceptible to interpretation as *signa*. Richard of Devizes commented that the appearance of a bat at midday in the monastery of St Swithun 'caused many people to whisper and marvel' at its significance; the Lanercost chronicler thought that the entry of a bird into a house through the chimney was an ill omen for the occupant.⁹⁵

More commonly signs were woven into political narratives. Comets, 'the terror of kings', served as astral punctuation marks in the history of kingdoms, indicating the deaths of rulers. William of Jumièges thought they marked the transfer of a kingdom.⁹⁶ The Melrose Chronicle was more precise, noting in 1165 that 'a comet is a star which is not always visible, but which appears most frequently upon the death of a king; but if it has streaming hair, and throws it off, as it were, then it betokens the ruin of a country'.⁹⁷ This passage also indicates the prudential importance of astral signs, warning also of the disordered politics which went with such transitions. Thus the death of Henry I was accompanied by grim signs in the skies as it plunged the Anglo-Norman realm into the chaos of

⁹² Ralph of Coggeshall's chronicle contains numerous references to such phenomena, though he seldom draws out their implications, RC, *passim*. See also *Peterborough Chronicle*, p. 157; *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 108.

⁹³ RH, p. 136

⁹⁴ RC, p. 120. See also the discussion of the monstrous in Daston and Parks, *Wonders*, pp. 173–214.

⁹⁵ RD, p. 3; *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ William of Jumièges, *The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis and Robert of Torigni*, ed. and trans. E. Van Houts, 2 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1992–5), II, pp. 160–1.

⁹⁷ *Melrose Chronicle*, p. 79.

Stephen's reign. The Peterborough Chronicle recounted how in 1135, as Henry prepared to cross the channel, 'the day darkened over all the counties and the sun became as though it were a three-night-old moon and the stars shone around it at midday'.⁹⁸ John of Worcester knew this event was an eclipse and said that 'it was so dark that men needed the guidance of candlelight to do anything'.⁹⁹ The Peterborough writer also observed that 'men were greatly afraid and frightened and said that a great event would come after this and so it did, for the same year the king died ... Then these lands were dark indeed, for everyone at once robbed one another.'¹⁰⁰ Events on earth as well as in the heavens could also act as dire warnings. Stephen's reign began ominously with the omission of the kiss of peace from his coronation ceremony and Henry of Huntingdon told how further disasters of the reign were foreshadowed during mass on Candlemas Day 1141 when the candle offered by the king shattered and the chain holding the pyx broke.¹⁰¹

Yet beyond this narrow historical and prudential significance, astral and other signs possessed moral and didactic functions. Portents could, for example, warn Christendom as a whole, or a particular people within it, to mend their sinful ways. Divinely ordained signs in the heavens were also commonly appropriated by chroniclers keen to offer veiled (or sometimes not so veiled) commentaries on the rule of a specific king, the firmament reflecting the virtues and vices of a terrestrial ruler. The portent could be a useful device here because the message itself could be coded. It could also function as a celestial rebuke, a way of criticising a ruler without threatening the entire divinely ordained hierarchy because God rather than man had (theoretically) delivered the reproach. Thus John of Worcester listed the catalogue of portents at William Rufus's death, observing that 'there were many signs in the sun, moon and stars, the sea flooded the shore, drowned men and beasts, destroying townships and houses'.¹⁰² More

⁹⁸ *Peterborough Chronicle*, p. 158.

⁹⁹ See JW, III, pp. 208–11; also WM, HN, pp. 11–12, p. 457. John dates the event earlier to 1133.

¹⁰⁰ *Peterborough Chronicle*, p. 158.

¹⁰¹ HH, pp. 732–3. The story is also told by Orderic and a rather different account with similar implications was related by Robert of Torigni: he described how, during celebration of mass, the host broke into three pieces in the hands of Bishop Alexander of Lincoln as he offered it to the king, RT, p. 221.

¹⁰² JW, III, pp. 92–5. John's account was one among many. Similar stories of blood-portents and demonic apparitions appeared in other chronicles: WM, GR, I, pp. 570–1; and for embroidered later versions see *Margam Annals* in *Annales Monastici*, AD 1–1432, ed. H. R. Luard, 5 vols. (RS, 1865–9), III, p. 207; *Bermondsey Annals* in *Annales Monastici*, III, p. 429; HH, pp. 446–7 (who dates the event to 1098); *Winchester Annals* in *Annales Monastici*, II, p. 40. New stories were still emerging in the thirteenth century such as the vivid tale of a demonic apparition on Bodmin Moor which signalled the king's death: Matthew Paris, *Matthaei Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani Chronica Majora*, ed. H. R. Luard, 7 vols. (RS, 1872–83), II, pp. 112–14.

arcanelly, 'in Berkshire for three weeks before his death blood bubbled out of a spring, the devil often appeared in horrible guises to many Normans in the woods, and spoke at length to them concerning King William, Ranulf [Flambard] and many others'. The cause of such appearances was plain enough: 'nor is it to be wondered at, for in their time all justice in law was silent, and money alone commanded the judges in all cases brought before them'. The clichéd case of the comet which portended the defeat and death of Harold on the field of Hastings makes a more sophisticated point than John's illustrated invective against Rufus. This comet set a divine seal on the Conqueror's seizure of the crown, victory on the field being inscribed in the heavens.

These were not the only political discourses making use of signs, though they are the best represented in the sources. The conviction that meaning inhered in extraordinary events was widely diffused in medieval England but the modes of interpretation were more various. A rare illustration of how signs may have been decoded in local communities surfaces in the *Itinerarium Kambriae* of Gerald of Wales. He described how, when the lake from which the River Llynfi flowed turned green, people turned to 'certain elderly folk' who lived in the region. They warned of impending disaster: 'that the water had become discoloured in the same way a short while before the devastation caused by Hywel ap Maredudd'.¹⁰³ Though the basic proposition that wonders might be pregnant with meaning may have been widely shared, this anecdote suggests how the specific resources for deciphering signs may have been stored in the memory of scattered communities, and particularly in the most authoritative memories of the elders within the collectivities of vill, manor or parish.

Yet, although belief in signs was generally shared in twelfth-century society, their interpretation produced divisions of opinion. First, we find that there was scope for heterodox explanation. A letter written by William of Glenluce to the prior of Melrose and incorporated in the Melrose Chronicle under the year 1216 illuminates something of the potential diversity. William described how one of the monks and a servant of his house had seen the moon transformed into fantastical shapes during a journey away from their monastery that April.¹⁰⁴ On hearing of these things, William appealed to scripture to explain them, seeing them

¹⁰³ GW, *IK*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ *Melrose Chronicle*, pp. 64–6. On the chronicle see A. A. M. Duncan, 'Sources and Uses of the Melrose Chronicle, 1165–1217', in S. Taylor (ed.), *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the Occasion of her Ninetieth Birthday* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 146–85 and esp. pp. 158–61.

as the works of Almighty God ‘who makes signs, portents, prodigies and miracles at his will’.¹⁰⁵ But William added a very different view which he claimed had been expounded by the monk’s servant. This man said that he had ‘frequently been told that these changes in the moon’s shape are produced by witches and magicians and women who are enchantresses’. Although the servant was swiftly disabused of this idea, the monk saying that these were signs which ‘portend something wonderful and fearful’, the text still discloses an alternative conception of the wondrous in which explanation was localised, resting not on the working of a distant God in the world but on the magical operations of human actors.

Secondly, if the mechanism of the sign could be understood in different ways, its meaning was usually even more complex and ambiguous. Although William of Glencluce had apparently determined the devices by which extraordinary astral phenomena were to be explained – demanding that they be viewed through the lens of scripture – this did not bring him understanding. The Melrose monks were to make the best sense that they could of the portent, secure in the knowledge that it must mean something and surmising that it represented some kind of warning. Interpretations could thus bend to political and other imperatives. We have already seen how Henry of Huntingdon interpreted the shattering of the candle offered by Stephen on Candlemas Day, but this was not the only account of the event. The *Gesta Stephani*, whose author was much more favourably disposed to the king, tells the same tale but with a different gloss: the candle went out but was relit; it shattered into pieces but did not fall from the king’s hand.¹⁰⁶ And the import was different too. It meant ‘of course’ that Stephen would lose control of the kingdom for his sins but do penance and regain it; that he would not abandon his realm, but, when in the power of his enemies, he would be guarded by divine providence. Signs were as waxen as Stephen’s offering, vulnerable to manipulation for political ends. Gaimar’s *Estoire* catches something of this chaos of conflicting understandings of signs. Describing scenes at court after a comet had appeared he claimed:

Some of those [people] who predicted and the good astronomers explained it to mean good, others evil. Many people saw it. On the night of the great litany, it caused as much brightness as if it were day. Many people looked at it; in many

¹⁰⁵ He cites the gospels by way of preface: ‘there shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of all nations, with perplexity; the sea and waves roaring’, Luke 21:25; *Melrose Chronicle*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁶ *Gesta Stephani*, pp. 110–13.

places there were divinations; everyone gave his prophecy; but quickly followed great contention, and great tribulation afterwards came upon the kingdom.¹⁰⁷

Chroniclers, fortified in varied degrees by hindsight and by trust in providence, distorted the initial reception of *signa* by those who witnessed them or heard about them. They tended to inscribe the sign with a clear moral. Orderic Vitalis described how in 1098 ‘the omnipotent Creator of all things showed certain portents in the world, whereby he filled the hearts of men with fear and through the marvels which were revealed gave a prognostic of the more terrible things which were to come’.¹⁰⁸ Those who saw these things could not know what they portended but, for Orderic as he looked back on them, they were filled with meaning because soon afterwards ‘changes of rulers occurred all over the world, while terrible disasters and rebellions and serious conflicts disturbed mankind’.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, William of Newburgh told how a spectral redness suffused the northern skies in England repeatedly and ‘terrified the minds of the witnesses’.¹¹⁰ As the sight recurred, fear among the onlookers receded but it provoked increased ‘interest and suspicion’ because no meaning could be teased from the spectacle. Writing with benefit of hindsight, William ‘knew’ that these signs in the sky indicated the capture far away of Richard I during his return journey from the Holy Land. Yet, as Gaimar’s words indicate, those who were at close proximity to such sights did not have the detachment needed to fit them tidily into providential schemes. Instead, full of fear, they had to contend with a proliferation of possible meanings.

Thirdly, if the ambiguity of signs could threaten providential understandings of the world, so could efforts to decode them for purely prudential purposes using technical arts such as astrology. Indeed, an excessive interest in the examination of portents for such ends was attacked by a number of chroniclers and other ecclesiastical writers. John of Salisbury was especially worried about this and struggled to distinguish superstitious inspection of omens from proper attentiveness to divine signs.¹¹¹ The practice was also dubious for Orderic who held that *signa* should improve morals and encourage avoidance of sin, by moving ‘the hearts of beholders to refrain from evil doing’.¹¹² Multiple disasters in 1109 were thus a stimulus to penitence: ‘divine vengeance

¹⁰⁷ Geoffrey Gaimar, *L’Estoire des Engleis by Geffrei Gaimar*, ed. A. Bell, Anglo-Norman Texts 14–16 (Oxford, 1960), p. 163.

¹⁰⁸ OV, v, pp. 192–3. ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* ¹¹⁰ WN, 1, pp. 401–2.

¹¹¹ JS, *Pol.*, 1, p. 68. He uses, as one argument, the point that the thing apparently indicated by a sign did not always come to pass. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹¹² OV, vi, pp. 226–7.

caused a number of scourges to punish the sins of men and, as always, made use of terror with a fatherly solicitude, calling sinners to repentance and showing forgiveness and salvation to the penitent'.¹¹³ He lambasted those who got caught up in worldly things, scorning those who were sucked into prudential readings of signs and then 'told their listeners whatever they wished according to their individual tastes.' Proud men, confident in their predictions, also 'recklessly boasted of future events as if they had already happened'.¹¹⁴ Such claims to foreknowledge tempted God, discarded all trust in providence and assumed a fixity in the course of future events which was incompatible with the creator's freedom of action. For many chroniclers, such an attachment to signs was superstitious. William of Poitiers noted, for example, that, when William the Conqueror was presented with his hauberk back to front as he dressed for battle anyone else would have been 'terrified' by such a portent. In contrast, the duke 'laughed at this inversion as an accident and did not fear it as a bad omen'.¹¹⁵ Here William of Poitiers wanted to emphasise the Conqueror's strength of purpose and trust in divine providence, but the language he adopts suggests something else. As the duke dismissed the omen as an accident (*casum*), he implied that within the grand patterns of providence some things happened simply by chance and were not so saturated with meaning after all.

Fourthly, doubts were succoured when the thing apparently signified did not always follow the sign. This might help to explain why Peter of Blois felt able to talk about things which happened simply by chance rather than by any elaborate design.¹¹⁶ The existence of a measure of doubt about signs is more surely indicated by the appearance in some chronicles of anticipatory self-defence against it. Thus the author of the *Gesta Stephani* felt the need to end his account of terrible portents in the northern skies with words of warning to any sceptics: 'Let not the reader mock me with a broad grin of derision if I say that the sky, which I saw with my own eyes, turned to a blaze and displayed thick clouds of coals of fire, was the shape of evils to come.'¹¹⁷ Such rhetoric about doubt had a venerable tradition but this was more than an empty flourish. The well-springs of mockery were fed by the ambiguities of signs, the scope for

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 166–7. ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 226–7.

¹¹⁵ WP, p. 125. The story gets embellished over time: cf. 'The Brevis Relatio de Guillelmo Nobilissimus Comite Normannorum, Written by a Monk of Battle Abbey', ed. E. M. C. Van Houts, in *Chronology, Conquest and Conflict in Medieval England*, Camden Miscellany, 34 (1997), pp. 1–48 at p. 7; Wace, *Roman de Rou*, p. 175. See also *The Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, ed. and trans. E. Searle, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1980), pp. 35–7.

¹¹⁶ Peter of Blois, *Epistolae*, ed. J. Migne, *PL*, CCVII, cols. 1–463 at cols. 190–5.

¹¹⁷ *Gesta Stephani*, pp. 52–3.

differing views, the opportunities for 'wrong' interpretations. That signs did occur, few might doubt, but any individual sign might be vulnerable to sceptical attack.

Finally, experience could also engender another response to signs, nourished in many cases by that taste for naturalising explanation that we have found surfacing in historical writing. We can see in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries attempts to explore the secondary causes which could explain *signa*. Such tendencies were not confined to chronicles alone but appear more generally and are to be found even in some hagiographies. For example, Adam of Eynsham, in his *Life* of St Hugh of Lincoln, explained how a swan would betray through its 'unusual excitement' that the bishop was travelling to a certain manor. Adam speculated that birds might be more sensitive than men 'because their natures contain so large an element of air and future events have frequently been predicted owing to their behaviour' but also added that the swan 'may have known this instinctively from the preparations and the bustle of the servants'.¹¹⁸ Ultimately, such rationalisations would prove deadly for theories of *signa* as searches for the meaning of anomalies gave way to quests for causes and thus seemingly extraordinary happenings found explanations in ordinary terms. But for the moment, at least, Adam's naturalising reflections could sit unproblematically in his larger hagiographical enterprise.

Signs were thus part of the common currency of belief in the twelfth century but they were susceptible to varied handling. Chroniclers, who provide our principal source, tended often to smooth out their complexities: they tidied signs into historical patterns which, with the advantage of hindsight, had become clear in their theologically trained and historically sensitive minds. And yet enough of their own uncertainty, and enough reporting of other views, survives in the chronicle record to reveal the varied receptions signs received. *Signa* might be explained in the heterodox terms of magical mechanisms, rather than being accounted direct divine interventions in the world. They might be read for the moral messages contained within or for purely prudential purposes. Their meaning might be unclear and their significance might, in specific cases, though probably not as a general category, be doubted. Finally, we can also see that reason might also be applied by some to the problems of tackling the meaning of the sign. Signs might even be reinterpreted in the light of new theories of nature, being explained in terms of physical mechanisms; they might, in an extension of this logic, also be subjected

¹¹⁸ AE, I, pp. 105–6.

Thinking about the supernatural

to technical, predictive arts which tried to elucidate their obscure significance. But for all the diversity of their reception, the idea of the sign, of a meaning-rich anomalous event which erupted in the ordinary course of things, remained the common property of the men and women of twelfth-century England.

Demons

In the case of demons, and unlike that of miracles and signs, the formal teachings of the church actively encouraged the idea that this element of the supernatural order might be intensely varied. Early demonological writings, especially those of Augustine and Gregory the Great, defined the powers of demons, allowing that they swarmed in the lower air, could travel great distances and conjecture the future but they also stressed that evil spirits took myriad forms and exploited their capabilities in very diverse ways.¹¹⁹ This thinking continued to shape twelfth-century demonology and William of Newburgh echoed its principles in a story about a holy man called Ketell. He stressed that demons ranged from the ‘small, contemptible, impotent in strength and dull in understanding’ to the ‘large, robust and crafty’ who ‘when permitted by a superior power’ were ‘extremely hurtful’.¹²⁰ Despite their aerial bodies, it was also accepted in the central middle ages that demons could take a great variety of tangible forms, appearing disguised as humans or in the shape of animals. Thus Walter Map told of a hermit beset by an evil angel in the shape of a snake and Reginald of Durham described how Godric of Finchale was plagued by hosts of devils in animal forms.¹²¹ Other demons, following traditions first examined by Augustine of Hippo, Caesarius of Arles and Isidore of Seville, were thought to take alluring human forms to tempt the faithful sexually. These *incubi* and *succubi*, as Orderic Vitalis and Gervase of Tilbury, among others, noted, were thought capable of intercourse with human beings and were held to inhabit the lower air alongside other evil spirits.¹²² Demons could also be a grotesque mix of human and animal – a shape which dramatised the otherness of evil angels and

¹¹⁹ For the roots of later demonology see Augustine, *City of God*, III, pp. 63–297; on these aspects of Augustine’s demonology see also Langton, *Supernatural*, p. 155.

¹²⁰ WN, I, p. 153.

¹²¹ OV, II, pp. 326–8; Map, pp. 140–1; Reginald of Durham, *Libellus de Vita et Miraculis S. Godrici, Heremitaie de Finchale Auctore Reginaldo Monacho Dunelmensis*, ed. J. Stevenson, Surtees Soc. (1847), pp. 196, 198, 275.

¹²² GT, p. 97; For discussion of a possible scriptural parallel drawn from the Book of Tobit see W. Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago and London, 2002), pp. 63–4.

yet hinted still at human connections and affinities. In the church art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries such gruesome hybrids began to appear with increasing frequency.¹²³ They can also be detected in texts.¹²⁴ Herbert Losinga conjured up the hideous hybridity of demons in a sermon-story of a royal favourite's deathbed, describing how 'flames were in their eyes and in their teeth whiteness and in their whole body a noxious blackness appeared; their hands had claws and their feet had claws; their breath was foul and their speech was not be endured by human ears, and they were of exceedingly great stature'.¹²⁵ Yet, even as representational norms emerged, these remained matters of artistic and authorial convenience: there was no reason why demons needed to appear in specific ways as theology continued to authorise variety. Thus particular and localised ideas of how evil spirits manifested themselves and behaved could survive, evolve and multiply and this need not necessarily concern the church.

Twelfth-century thought about demons was thus rich and varied but this variety did not extend to widespread doubts about their existence. Doubt was certainly thinkable: Caesarius of Heisterbach composed an *exemplum* in which demons were shown to a doubter by a necromancer; Peter of Cornwall complained that some men did not believe in good or bad angels.¹²⁶ But much more frequently, those engaged in didactic writing took belief in evil spirits for granted and concentrated on using them to illustrate a morality. For example when Herbert Losinga dramatised human sinfulness in one of his sermons by depicting demons around deathbeds, he appears to have assumed that his audience already believed in evil angels.¹²⁷ He did not justify their existence but simply located

¹²³ J. B. Russell, *Lucifer: the Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1984), pp. 129–57, 208–33; L. Jordan, 'Demonic Elements in Anglo-Saxon Iconography', in E. Szarmach (ed.), *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Culture* (Kalamazoo, 1986), pp. 283–317; K. L. Jolly, 'Elves in the Psalms: the Experience of Evil from a Cosmic Perspective', in A. Ferreiro (ed.), *The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 19–44.

¹²⁴ On such representations see L. Link, *The Devil: a Mask without a Face* (London, 1995); R. Muchembled, *Une Histoire du diable (12e–20e siècles)* (Paris, 2000).

¹²⁵ Herbert Losinga, *The Life, Letters, and Sermons of Bishop Herbert de Losinga (b. circ. A.D. 1050, d. 1119): the letters, as translated by the editors, being incorporated with the life, and the sermons being now first edited from a MS in the possession of the University of Cambridge, and accompanied with an English translation and notes*, eds. and trans. E. M. Goulburn and H. Symonds, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1878), II, p. III.

¹²⁶ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. J. Strange (Cologne, 1851), I, pp. 276–8. For the claim that some doubted the existence of good or bad angels see the discussion of Peter of Cornwall's *Liber Revelationum* in Bartlett, *England*, p. 478.

¹²⁷ Herbert Losinga, *Life, Letters and Sermons*, II, p. III. Demons were commonly represented patrolling the edges of life. See for example a story of demons swarming around the deathbed of a young monk in WM, *GP*, p. 314.

them in a clear moral framework and ascribed to them a clear didactic purpose, each being armed with books in which the sins of the dying were enumerated. In similar fashion, Benedictines appear to have assumed belief in a world full of evil spirits when they advertised monastic liturgies in terms designed to make them appeal to a warrior elite. The monastery could thus be portrayed as a great fortress of prayer, garrisoned by ‘cowled champions’; a citadel against whose walls devils would constantly be dashed.¹²⁸ Texts which were aimed at wider audiences reveal the same tendency. For example, demons figured as important *dramatis personae* in many miracle collections, causing numberless instances of possession or assailing the faithful in other ways such that saintly intercession was needed.¹²⁹ In the production of narratives designed to advertise the power of the saint, the evil spirit needed no introduction or special explanation. The imagination of the audience, like that of Herbert’s congregation or monastic benefactors, was, it seems, already populated by such beings.

That church teaching permitted variety in the ways demons were conceived limited the scope for doubt: if the faithful were not told very much about what they *ought* to think about devils, the possibilities for tension inevitably diminished. Nevertheless, the church, in its formal teachings, did try to give a certain amount of basic explanation about why devils possessed power in the world. Early medieval demonology, particularly that developed by Augustine and Gregory the Great, continued to offer the scaffold for official ecclesiastical thinking in the twelfth century.¹³⁰ There was some learned contention here – for example, Gregory’s idea that the devil acquired extensive ‘rights’ over humankind as a consequence of the Fall was challenged by Anselm of Canterbury – but theologians agreed that the devil and his demons must be firmly located in a coherent model which explained their power to test and tempt and punish.¹³¹ The widespread conviction that evil spirits existed,

¹²⁸ OV, III, pp. 141–50. This particular example is Orderic’s depiction of Odelerius of Orleans encouraging Roger, earl of Shrewsbury, to establish a religious house.

¹²⁹ See for example cases of possession in *The Vita Wulfstani of William of Malmesbury to which are Added the Extant Abridgements of this Work and the Miracles and Translation of Wulfstan*, ed. R.R. Darlington, Camden 3rd series (1928), pp. 27–30; ‘The Miracles of St Cuthbert on Fame’, ed. H.E. Craster, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 70 (1952), pp. 5–19 at p. 17; Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich by Thomas of Monmouth*, eds. and trans. A. Jessopp and M.R. James (Cambridge, 1896), p. 203; John of Ford, *Wulfric of Haselbury by John, Abbot of Ford*, ed. M. Bell, Somerset Record Soc. (London, 1933), pp. 26, 31–5, 91, 92; Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, pp. 381, 406–7; AE, II, pp. 124–6.

¹³⁰ On these aspects of demonology see Langton, *Supernatural*, pp. 147–76.

¹³¹ C. W. Marx, *The Devil’s Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1995); H. Leyser, ‘Two Concepts of Temptation’, in Gameson and Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture*, pp. 318–26.

in all their horrifying variety, must, in other words, be joined to a singular purpose; demons must be situated within a moral structure, drawing their strength from human sinfulness and acting only by divine permission.

It is at this point that we can detect a gap between the world as these learned churchmen were trying to present it in their didactic writings and the world as it emerged from lived experience. The chronicles, again, offer a window into this. In these texts demons might erupt unexpectedly and often inexplicably rather than being conceived as part of a structured and ordered course of events shaped by providence and shot through with meaning. Although authors such as Orderic were set on weaving historical experience closely into a scripturally grounded morality, other chroniclers used the demonic to frame more limited, local explanations of wondrous and terrifying happenings which they witnessed or heard about from reliable sources. Thus especially violent storms became associated with the works of demons.¹³² The Lanercost chronicler recounted cautionary tales illustrating that 'it is evil spirits that stir up tempests' and described how during a storm in the diocese of York people 'had heard demons yelling in the air'.¹³³ The Melrose chronicler offered a similar but more gossipy account of storms which struck Yorkshire and parts of southern England in 1165. The Devil himself 'was seen by many people taking the lead in that tempest; he was in the form of a black horse of large size, and always kept hurrying towards the sea, while he was followed by thunder and lightning, and fearful noises and a destructive hail'.¹³⁴ In the wake of the storm, evidence of the horse was found: 'the hoofprints of this accursed horse were of a very enormous size, especially on the hill near the town of Scarborough, from which he gave a leap into the sea; where, for a whole year four hoofprints were clearly visible, deeply impressed in the earth'.¹³⁵ The chronicler ended with a vague gesture towards the 'ineffable mercy of God', but the story he told made the demonic less structured and more chaotic in its operations than any of Orderic's accounts.¹³⁶

Ralph of Coggeshall presented the demonic in a similar way. He recounted how on 24 June 1205 'horrendous thunder was heard through all the night and terrific lightning, being driven forth incessantly from clouds, was seen through all England'.¹³⁷ At Maidstone, a black cadaver was reported which possessed the head of an ass, the body of a man and

¹³² On the idea that demons inhabit the lower air see the reassertion of the patristic view in Ivo of Chartres, *Panormia*, ed. J. Migne, *PL*, 161, cols. 1037–2428 at col. 1322; and for a brief discussion see Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, p. 15; S. Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London, 2000), pp. 10, 60.

¹³³ *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 104. ¹³⁴ *Melrose Chronicle*, p. 37. ¹³⁵ *Ibid.* ¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *R.C.*, p. 155.

‘other portentous members’. More storms struck on 29 July, this time with such violence that men feared judgement day had come. As in the Melrose Chronicle, terrible footprints were found and speculations arose about what had happened the previous night, one view among unspecified men being that ‘they were footprints of the demons and that good angels had scattered them with thunderbolts’.¹³⁸ Miracle collections also suggest the way in which demons may have been invoked as explanations by the laity who found themselves *in extremis*. Folcard described in his life of John of York how sailors on a ship reported having seen devils around the vessel when it was almost destroyed in a storm.¹³⁹

In these stories we find not densely argued moralities but evocations of terror and wonder at a world in which fearful events could be the works of immediate, localised personalised agents. This points to ways in which the demonic may have been conceptualised outside learned demonology. The cult of saints supplies a useful analogy here. Peter Brown has pointed out that saints became the focus of late antique and early medieval devotions because their simultaneously human and divine qualities made them at once intelligible and potent as sources of supernatural aid.¹⁴⁰ Demons, in contrast, represented an embodiment of evil cosmological forces, a locus of fear and a ‘counterpoint’ to the hope represented by the saints.¹⁴¹ Just as the faithful sometimes stood accused of being too caught up in the wonder-working of particular saints and too little concerned with the models they offered for living, so they were also charged with being mesmerised by particular terrors of demons and blind to the sin that empowered them.¹⁴² Burchard of Worms had warned in his *Corrector* that some foolish men feared to travel before cockcrow lest they be attacked by evil spirits. In the thirteenth century, authors of the earliest *exempla* collections generally did not feel the need to convince their audiences that demons existed – they could usually take this as a given.¹⁴³ The message they constantly felt the need to drive home was that demonic power depended on human sin.

The story told by William of Newburgh about the rustic divine named Ketell is suggestive of the difficulty the church may have experienced in constantly holding before the faithful the idea of a world filled with demons which were animated by sinful human action. The tale of Ketell functioned as an antidote to moral complacency because he

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹³⁹ *The Historians of the Church of York and its Archbishops*, ed. J. Raine, 3 vols. (RS, 1874–94), 1, pp. 318–20.

¹⁴⁰ Brown, *Cult of Saints*, p. 75. ¹⁴¹ Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 13–21.

¹⁴² See below, pp. 107–28.

¹⁴³ See for example Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, 1, pp. 274–340.

could detect the clouds of otherwise unseen spirits working in the everyday world. He was able to relate how demons ‘wandering about, they would afflict men, even in small ways, exulting if, by chance, they had brought about the most minor injury’.¹⁴⁴ Ketell described how demons might make horses stumble and draw pleasure when men uttered curses and imprecations or frequent the shoulders of men drinking in ale houses (dispersing into the air if prayers were uttered but resuming their perches when the drinking started again).¹⁴⁵ Elsewhere in the *Historia*, William may have had an eye for the ambiguous wonder, but this tale stands out from the crowd: it was a simpler morality which connected demons to sin. More importantly, it also stressed the presence of the demonic in the midst of the mundane. Men might (‘superstitiously’?) reflect on demonic agency as they witnessed storms or considered wandering abroad at night but they needed to remember it when they committed countless petty sins in the broad light of day.

Yet this neat, ordered world of demons empowered by sin was not the one which most people inhabited. Even chroniclers who were keen to connect stories of the supernatural to particular sins were flummoxed by tales which they heard from reliable witnesses and yet could in no way explain. Thus the Lanercost Chronicle described how a young woman was killed by an evil spirit.¹⁴⁶ The woman, it transpired, had been left on the road near Haddington in a snowstorm by her husband as he hurried ahead to light a fire at home. On returning, he found that a demon in the guise of a child, but ‘with a hand like a horse’s hoof’, had torn his wife’s flesh and left her for dead. The chronicler could find no rhyme nor reason in his tale, leaving it simply as a salutary warning about the evil powers of the air and testimony to their chaotic, random assaults on the faithful.¹⁴⁷

Thus although there might be general acceptance in medieval society that demons were powerful and heterogeneous in their forms, churchmen, at least in normative writings, were keen to inculcate an idea on which the faithful generally were not nearly so firmly agreed: that demons were confined within the scheme of divine providence. Sermons and *exempla* in particular tried to lend the widespread belief that evil spirits

¹⁴⁴ WN, I, p. 151.

¹⁴⁵ The demon drink (in a quite literal sense) was also an issue of interest to other chroniclers. The Lanercost chronicler noted how an ‘exceedingly hideous likeness of a spirit of the air . . . having a foul body, fiery eyes and terrific dimensions’ appeared to a drunkard in an alehouse, *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 75.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5. Such stories of random assaults by demons are numerous: see for example the Winchester annalist’s account of a man who was attacked by a demon in a field, in *Annals of Winchester* in *Annales Monastici*, II, p. 69; also for the story of a man attacked by a demon while lying in bed see Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 285–6.

¹⁴⁷ *Lanercost Chronicle*, pp. 104–5.

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existed a moral shape, making demons obedient to theological rules. Yet chronicles and miracle collections, texts less committed to teaching demonology, suggest that evil spirits usually remained far less ordered in both the thought of churchmen who produced the histories and *miracula*, and in the local patterns of belief reflected in their writings.

Ambiguities

As the idea of a 'moral universe', shaped and ordered by providence, did not command general assent even among chroniclers and their audiences, let alone in the religion of the parishes, imaginative spaces existed between the miraculous and demonic in which other more ambiguous stories about the supernatural might thrive. The cryptic story from the Lanercost Chronicle indicates the complexity of this world of invisible spirits, and other historical and hagiographical writings also supply evidence of supernatural beings which escaped established theological categories. Gervase of Tilbury, describing beliefs he said had been current in England, told of strange household spirits called follets which, under cover of their invisibility, were disposed to throw sticks, stones and kitchen utensils at householders and were not deterred by holy water or exorcism.¹⁴⁸ Similar house spirits were described in Pembrokeshire by Gerald of Wales. They entertained themselves by cutting holes in linen but, again, were not susceptible to sacramental countermeasures and indeed pelted priests with rubbish if ever they came to exorcise them.¹⁴⁹ Gervase also discussed ambiguous beings named 'neptuni' and 'portuni' – which he again proved unable to categorise – and curious spectral creatures known as 'gyants'. He tentatively labelled them 'a certain kind of demon', but admitted that they were more neutral in their effects, helpfully appearing as a warning of fires.¹⁵⁰ Both Gervase and Gerald were forced to concede by this evidence that perhaps there were categories of morally neutral spirits which were merely mischievous or even useful to humans, 'it being a law of their nature', as Gervase put it, 'that they can be helpful but do no real harm'.¹⁵¹

In other accounts, whole parallel worlds, inhabited by supernatural beings, were opened up. Gerald of Wales, as we have seen, told a story about a priest who entered an extraordinary land parallel to his own. William of Newburgh recounted a tale he had known since childhood of a rustic who had seen a spectral banquet taking place inside a hill in Yorkshire.¹⁵² The author of the miracles of St Cuthbert on Farne related

¹⁴⁸ GT, p. 99. ¹⁴⁹ GW, *IK*, pp. 93–4. ¹⁵⁰ GT, pp. 675–7. ¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² WN, 1, p. 85–6.

how a man named Richard of Sunderland had, while cutting rushes, met two men dressed in green and, in spite of 'popular tales' warning about the dangers of consorting with such beings, allowed himself to be led into another world where he lost his mind and his faculty of speech (eventually to have them restored by the powers of the saint). And crossing the boundary between this world and mysterious parallel universes we also find fairies who swept infants away, leaving changelings in their place, and fairy brides who married mortal men only to vanish from the world when suffering some unwonted affront.¹⁵³

These examples, and they are but a few among many, prompt questions about why ambiguous denizens of air, earth and water suddenly seem to have become so abundant in the late twelfth century. The answer is not to be found in shifts in local belief but rather in the proliferation of texts and the transformation of authorial agendas and genre conventions. We have already observed that many chroniclers were becoming more interested in describing nature. With this came a greater willingness to engage with 'credible' eyewitness testimony and a subtle shift of emphasis in favour of knowledge based on observation at the expense of that grounded in revelation. At the same time, these stories also had a special power to fascinate authors because they stood out more starkly within a nature which, for many of our clerical writers, seemed increasingly patterned and regular. Thus, spirits and beings which did not conform readily to established theological verities were able to float more freely into historical, geographical and encyclopedic texts. But this in turn generated second-order problems of explanation. Ralph of Coggeshall energetically described ambiguous wonders but then had problems interpreting them. He was especially perplexed by a story of a wild man who was pulled out of the sea off Orford by fishermen.¹⁵⁴ The man spoke no English, ate raw fish, showed no signs of reverence when taken to the parish church and was unforthcoming even when tortured on the orders of the custodian of Orford Castle, Bartholomew de Glanville. Ralph concluded that 'if this was a mortal man, whether it was some fish taking human form or some malignant spirit concealing itself in some submerged body of a man . . . is not easy to ascertain'.¹⁵⁵

New approaches to nature might allow such stories to flood into historical writing, but theology offered limited resources for rationalising

¹⁵³ For beliefs about changelings see Schmitt, *Holy Greyhound*, pp. 74–8; D. Purkiss, *Troublesome Things: a History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London, 2000), pp. 106–9, 156–7; Wilson, *Magical Universe*, p. 211; Becket *Materials*, 1, p. 204.

¹⁵⁴ RC, p. 118; for a somewhat similar story of a wild man see Map, pp. 368–70.

¹⁵⁵ RC, p. 118.

the ambiguous supernatural once it was there. Gervase also struggled with words to characterise the mysterious *portuni*, being unsure whether to call them demons and alighting eventually on the vague label *effigies* (phantoms/visible forms) to capture the essence of spirits which were of unknown origin and purpose. And he stumbled over theology too, wondering whether some spirits might be allowed by God to perpetrate jokes by fashioning bodies from air and then averring that perhaps some less pride-filled angels had fallen less far when they tumbled out of heaven with Lucifer. Walter Map, though often clearer (and more conservative) than Gervase about the categories in the supernatural order, also had to work hard for a language to describe mysterious fairy brides that he heard about in Wales. Eventually he opted for 'fates' to try to catch something of the ambiguity of the mysterious vernacular fay which these stories seemed to enshrine but ended up associating the women (perhaps by design) with the demonic as a consequence of this election. In each of these cases we can see clearly that the Latin language with its limited array of spirit-names was not easily applied to these ambiguous productions of vernacular culture.

William of Newburgh offers a further object lesson in the difficulties of forming such matter into theological shapes. William had to deal with an especially intractable story of two green children who were found in a cornfield in Essex. Initially, the pair spoke no English but eventually managed to communicate that they had come from a strange land, lit only by twilight, where St Martin was venerated. William worried away at the story, saying that it and stories like it 'would appear incredible and beyond belief, were they not proven to have taken place by faithful witnesses'. He acknowledged that 'the cause of those green children, who are said to have emerged from the earth, is too hidden for the weakness of our senses to investigate'.¹⁵⁶ And then he turned to Augustine's *De Trinitate* and suggested that evil angels might contrive wonders 'partly by trickery (*praestigialiter*) and illusion (*fantastice*)' and 'partly in reality' so that 'men may be held in blind amazement' and be 'more dangerously deceived'.¹⁵⁷ But then why had William recorded the tale at all? Here he defends himself from anticipated criticism by warning: 'let everyone say as he pleases and reason on such matters according to his abilities; I feel no regret at having recorded an event so prodigious and

¹⁵⁶ WN, II, pp. 86–7.

¹⁵⁷ Augustine, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini de Trinitate Libri xiv*, ed. W.J. Mountain, 2 vols., Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 50 and 50A (Turnhout, 1968), I, p. 179; also Langton, *Supernatural*, p. 155.

wonderful (*prodigiosum mirabilemque*).¹⁵⁸ The story confronted William with an insoluble problem: interested in explaining a world he had first described on the basis of experience and credible testimony, he now found himself prisoner of its ambiguities.

This was not a problem which faced William alone. In a sequence of three stories about the subterranean realm, he reveals other churchmen struggling to interpret ambiguous wonders and producing a range of answers which must have heightened William's own uncertainty and anxiety about how to make sense of the green children. The first account concerned two dogs found alive in a hollow stone. In this instance the bishop of Winchester, who was struck by the find, took one of them into his household and tamed it. The second tale described how a toad was unearthed in similar circumstances, and yet on this occasion a churchman took the opposite line and ordered that the creature be closed up in the stone and reburied. Finally, William's account of a phantom banquet under a hill, the third story of the group, was received more neutrally. A souvenir cup purloined by an eyewitness was apparently prized by the English and Scottish kings but the standing of the mysterious revellers he had seen remained entirely opaque. Thus complex and contradictory messages about the significance of wonders from worlds beneath our own flooded the *Historia* and William was in no position to impose consistency on the world of ambiguous wonder beyond the text. At the outset of his chronicle, he had warned his reader that he was but a 'simple relater' rather than a 'predicting interpreter'. Now, even if these utterances had once been lip-service to convention, they became his justification and defence.¹⁵⁹

Exactly what we are to make of the stories themselves is a more complex question. There is little doubt that there was a tale-telling market at court and in many religious houses, as chroniclers enthusiastically collected narratives from communities which generated and sustained them. It is very likely that the post-conversion process of rationalising the spirit world had never gone so far that space ceased to exist in the interstices of vernacular cultures for localised, unofficial beliefs about ambiguous beings to persist and thrive. Some such beliefs might be appropriated or anathematised by a church but only on a limited and selective basis. Karen Jolly has shown, for example, how Anglo-Saxon representations of elves, spirits which caused illness in human beings and livestock, were reworked and assimilated to something much closer to patristic archetypes of demons.¹⁶⁰ We also find some penitentials

¹⁵⁸ WN, I, p. 84. ¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4. ¹⁶⁰ Jolly, *Popular Religion*, pp. 132–68.

attacking those who attempted to placate spirits – often labelled as fauns, fairies or ‘Fates’ – by leaving offerings of food, setting a table for them in the house or casting a bow into a barn before nightfall ‘with which the devils should play’, in the hope that they then ‘might bring the greater plenty’.¹⁶¹ A variant version of Bartholomew Iscanus’s penitential from the early thirteenth century bluntly denounced people for believing in ‘those devils called fairies/fauns’ (*diaboli quo faunos uocant*).¹⁶² But the half-heartedness of these condemnations is betrayed by the relatively light penances imposed for such ‘false’ beliefs, indicating that they were not the highest of priorities. One might draw a similar conclusion from the handling of such ideas by the Worcestershire priest called Layamon. His much reworked version of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia* was written in early middle English probably between 1199 and 1225, most likely for an audience of the ‘middling sort’ rather than the social elite. It happily evoked a cosmos populated by ambiguous beings.¹⁶³ Layamon spoke of treacherous mermen and the dangers they presented to sailors.¹⁶⁴ In describing the distant past, and as a prelude to talking about the half-demonic Merlin, he also discussed the sky-dwelling spirits, including *incubi*, which deceived folk in dreams but did little real harm.¹⁶⁵ In a further innovation, he spoke of elves, or perhaps fairies (*aluen*). These beings, we discover, swept Arthur away at the moment of his birth and imbued the future king with great magical gifts which would ensure that he was strong, rich and generous.¹⁶⁶ Later we also, in a throwaway line, learn that elves had fashioned Arthur’s armour.¹⁶⁷ Here an ordinary churchman, writing for an audience of middling status, introduces *incubi*, elves and other ambiguous supernatural *dramatis personae* as if they were elements of a shared culture, needing little explanation and less defence. This seems to have been the sort of thought-world with which Gerald of Wales, William of Newburgh and Gervase of Tilbury were also

¹⁶¹ Such prohibitions appear in a thirteenth-century variant manuscript (BL MS Cotton Faustina A VIII, ff. 31–2) of Bartholomew’s penitential. It is not at all clear why or when these interpolations were made but they are introduced seamlessly by the copyist, forming a preface to the body of Bartholomew’s penitential proper. They owe no obvious direct debt to other extant texts, though there are some resonances with injunctions in Burchard of Worms’s *Corrector*. For the manuscript see M. Tyson, ‘The Annals of Southwark and Merton’, *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, 36 (1925), pp. 24–57; on Bartholomew and his penitential see A. Morey, *Bartholomew Iscanus, Bishop and Canonist: a Study in the Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge, 1937), pp. 79–112.

¹⁶² *Reliquiae Antiquae: Scraps from Ancient Manuscripts Illustrating Early English Literature and Language*, eds. T. Wright and J. O. Halliwell, 2 vols., (London, 1845), p. 285.

¹⁶³ *Lawman Brut*, trans. R. Allen (London, 1992), pp. xvi–xxiv.

¹⁶⁴ *Layamon*, pp. 56–7. ¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 236–7. ¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 384–5. ¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 463–4.

becoming increasingly engaged during the decades around the end of the twelfth century.

CONCLUSION

Taken to its extreme by some twelfth-century theologians and chroniclers, the formative images of the creation offered by Augustine would tend to infuse the world with the supernatural and dissolve the supernatural into the world. The wondrous workings of the creator and his guiding providence were everywhere. But we have seen that the case for such an interpretation had to be asserted, by its stalwart supporters such as Orderic, against another in which the miraculous and the providential were much more attenuated. This understanding, in which divine action was thought to be more confined, was not restricted to those influenced by the schools; the schoolmen had simply intellectualised existing intuitions. For many chroniclers, and for most audiences, in the twelfth century, dominant assumptions were shaped by a strong sense of nature's essential regularity; a regularity in which the immediate working of God was less likely to be identified. Supernatural anomalies, disturbing the patterns taught by experience, were clearly expected. Miracles were thought to occur, demons were believed to appear, signs erupted in the heavens. And yet these things were held to be exceptional and, perhaps more importantly, when they did seem to take place they frequently lacked a clear moral rationale or an obvious place in the divine scheme for those who thought they saw them, heard about or recorded them. The supernatural, even when it came to miracles, demons and signs, was more chaotic and complicated, and less clear in its messages, than Orderic made it seem.

Yet, as we have observed, the supernatural as it was conceived in the localities amounted to more than miracles, demons and signs. The growing interest of many twelfth-century writers in the regularities and anomalies of nature might be a blessing for the historian in this respect. It led to the disclosure of this complicated world of belief. But writing about such things threw up new and larger intellectual problems for the authors themselves. They collected stories, with plausible testimonials attached, which, like many accounts of miracles, demons and signs, transcended experience and lacked an obvious moral significance, but, unlike the more conventional tales, also completely escaped theological categorisation. The ambiguous supernatural left chroniclers such as William of Newburgh spell-bound in wonderment: authorial wonderment to which we shall return in the [final chapter](#). But, in thinking about how this final group of mysterious stories was received, I have

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side-stepped a question about their origins, already raised, but left unanswered: might these stories represent the vestiges of an alternative way of imagining the supernatural which was not Christian? Are they perhaps, as some historians have hinted, shadows of an older, ‘pagan’, cosmology? This issue is the subject of the [next chapter](#).

Chapter 2

INVENTING PAGANS

The existence of stories about the ambiguous supernatural prompts inevitable questions about the cultures which generated them and the possibility that beneath the surface of shared Christian rituals there existed depths of belief which were not fully Christian, embedded in cosmologies which preserved vestiges of paganism. Yet such arguments for ‘pagan survivals’ seem in many ways very problematic for the ambiguous beings we met in the [previous chapter](#) had been readily admitted into a Christian framework by clerical writers who were sensitised to error and heathenism. For churchmen to report these beliefs without recognising their connotations would demand a degree of interchange between local and clerical communities great enough to transmit the stories and yet a cultural discontinuity sharp enough to make the clerical writer blind to their implications. Layamon evoked the vanished pagan past populated by a muddle of gods from Woden to Mercury and Frea to Diana, whose knowledge of the future might be solicited by pouring milk into the temple fire.¹ That these were all faces of the devil, the parish priest of Worcester was in no doubt, but he was far less scathing, as we have seen, about the elves and even the *incubi*. So ‘survivalist’ theses built on stories about such ambiguous beings would be on rather shaky foundations. And yet there is a small body of stronger evidence for pockets of pagan cult in the localities – ‘heathen’ practices which a handful of churchmen writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries explicitly denounced. This ‘best evidence’ for pagan survivals, set in the context of church campaigns of Christianisation and legislative action against heathenism, is the subject of this chapter.

CHRISTIANISING CULTURE

There is a need here to consider how fully official church teaching had penetrated the localities, what kind of Christianity had taken root there

¹ *Layamon*, pp. 48–55.

and how far local religious culture was different from that of ecclesiastical elites. Sources are too scattered and fragmentary to allow anything but an imperfect discussion of these issues but it is possible to reconstruct some features of local religious life with a degree of confidence. The period c.900–1250 certainly witnessed a transformation of church organisation in the localities which seems to have been driven at least in part by lay demand. We know that by the time Domesday Book was compiled in 1086, the religious landscape of much of England had undergone considerable change. A pastoral system once dominated by minsters and staffed by teams of clergy ministering in extensive *parochiae* had given way to one in which local churches and chapels came to serve the needs of towns and villages.² But the impulse for this change came not only from above but also from below, from the laity themselves. Local lords and groups of free peasants, in some instances responding to new circumstances created by fragmenting lordship, took the initiative in building chapels and installing priests.³ We can only conjecture as to the motives at work here, but it seems quite likely that the priest, through sacraments, blessing and cursing, could apply the supernatural power claimed by the church to communal and individual needs in ways that seemed valuable to worshipping communities. The church itself offered a sacred space in which collective prayers could be offered up and oblations bestowed, providing a buttress against misfortune in this world.⁴ The immediate availability of a priest might be valuable for baptisms and churchings and also, perhaps more urgently, for provision of last rites to the dying and ease of burial of the dead.

Thus there was demand in the localities for that supernatural power which the church made available through its rituals. But to gauge how fully local belief might be shaped by official teaching we need to explore the evolving parochial infrastructures of twelfth-century England in more

² A great deal of recent scholarship has been devoted to illuminating this transformation and the forces driving the trend towards 'pastoral localism'. See above p. 2. For regional complications to the pattern see also D. M. Hadley, 'Conquest, Colonisation and the Church: Ecclesiastical Organisation in the Danelaw', *Historical Research* 69 (1996), pp. 109–28; J. Blair, 'Secular Minster Churches in Domesday Book', in P. Sawyer (ed.), *Domesday Book: a Reassessment* (London, 1985), pp. 104–42.

³ On the emergence of self-identifying parish communities see S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1997), pp. 79–92. One impulse here was the emergence of nucleated settlements and a resulting sense that the mother church was too distant. See for example the case of a chapel and cemetery being established at Pleshey (because the mother church at High Easter proved to be too far away during bad weather) in *The Book of the Foundation of Walden Monastery*, eds. and trans. D. Greenway and L. Watkiss, *Oxford Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 50–3.

⁴ See M. Brett, *The English Church under Henry I* (Oxford, 1975), p. 222; Harper-Bill, 'Searching for Salvation', pp. 19–40.

detail. In particular we need to think about the local priests because they were the key bindings between diocesan hierarchies and worshipping communities.⁵ These men cut shadowy figures but we can see, from the end of the tenth century, bishops taking an especially close interest in the formation of 'parish' clergy. As the minster-system fragmented, local priests were becoming in many places the primary means by which sacraments were administered, liturgies made available to the ordinary faithful and teaching delivered through word and example. In consequence bishops were aware that any efforts to reform the lives of the laity hinged increasingly on the capacity of local priests to deliver new messages effectively. They needed to command respect, be well schooled and offer guidance that was authoritative, because, as Aelfric of Eynsham (c.955–1010) worried, 'blind is the teacher if he has no book-learning and thus deceives the laymen with his lack of knowledge'.⁶

As early as the beginning of the eleventh century, we see the importance of the local clergy acknowledged in the efforts of leading churchmen to regulate them and improve their learning.⁷ The late tenth and early eleventh centuries witnessed a burst of pastoral letters, law codes and ecclesiastical legislation designed to improve religious observance in the localities. This flurry included the so-called Northumbrian Priests' Law which was aimed specifically at the reform of local clergy.⁸ Inspired in large measure by the reformist ambitions of Aelfric of Eynsham, Wulfstan of York (d. 1023) and their successors, such texts sought to 'desecularise' the clergy, sharpen their distinctiveness, raise their status as the ministers of the sacraments and enhance their standing as teachers.⁹ Local priests were conceived as the key mediators of learning to the laity 'lest they perish through lack of knowledge'. The Canons of Pseudo-Edgar (1005×8)

⁵ On this key role of the priest see R. I. Moore, 'Literacy and the Making of Heresy', in P. Biller and A. Hudson (eds.), *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 19–37.

⁶ 'Aelfric's Letter for Wulfsig III (993 × 5)', in *Councils and Synods* 1, i, p. 209.

⁷ 'The Northumbrian Priests' Law (1008 × 23)', in *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 449–68.

⁸ On these aspects of late Anglo-Saxon religious culture see Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 368–425; H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1986), pp. 247–77; H. R. Loyn, *The English Church, 940–1154* (Harlow, 2000); J. Hill, 'Monastic Reform and the Secular Church: Aelfric's Pastoral Letters in Context', in C. Hicks (ed.), *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford, 1992), pp. 103–17.

⁹ M. McGatch, *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Aelfric and Wulfstan* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 4–59. For criticisms of the excessively secular lifestyles of the priests of the eleventh century, especially their tendency to marry, see 'Aelfric's First Old English Pastoral Letter for Wulfstan (c.1006)', in *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 278–9; 'Aelfric's Letter to Wulfsig III', *ibid.*, p. 198; 'The Northumbrian Priests' Law', *ibid.*, p. 459. Both reformers worked to end such practices and to mark priests off from the laity by prohibiting them from engaging in trade (though they were, interestingly, to learn a handicraft to help support themselves) and banning them from bearing arms, wearing secular dress or getting drunk. See 'Aelfric's Letter to Wulfsig III', in *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 211–12, 219; 'Aelfric's First Old English Pastoral Letter for Wulfstan', *ibid.*, p. 296.

conjured up this ideal, stressing that 'it is right that priests preach to the people every Sunday and always set a good example'.¹⁰ And a letter of Aelfric to Wulfsiges gives a glimpse of what was to be taught, requiring the masspriest 'to tell the people on Sundays and festivals the meaning of the gospel (in English) and about the paternoster and about the creed also, as often as he can, as an incitement to men that they may know the faith and observe Christianity'.¹¹ Similarly, in a letter to Wulfstan of York, Aelfric enjoined that masspriests must be able to 'preach to men the true faith and tell them homilies'.¹²

So the will existed at least in the time of Aelfric and Wulfstan to reform the local clergy in such a way that they became effective instruments of preaching and catechesis. But that there was great fear that these men might themselves be 'blind' to the truths of the faith points us towards a difficulty in interpreting this evidence of pastoral care. Our texts disclose the aspirations of a clerical-reformist *avant garde* rather than the social realities of local religious life. And here the pragmatism of the legislators, who acknowledged the limitations of priests (most probably of peasant stock and with limited formal education), is sometimes telling. It is most clearly seen in the choice of the vernacular to instruct the local clergy, Aelfric observing that 'it befits us bishops that we reveal to you priests the written instruction our canon teaches us, and also the gospel, in the English language; for not all of you can understand the Latin'.¹³

How far this willingness to compromise on the means allowed the effective dissemination of rudimentary messages about official belief and practice cannot be measured with any ease in the eleventh century. But, even if the strategy devised by Aelfric and Wulfstan bore fruit, there is reason to think this may have withered on the vine in the wake of the Norman Conquest. The weakening of Old English as a language of written communication would have dealt a grave blow to the kind of vernacular 'textual community' Aelfric was attempting to foster, reducing the capacity of local priests to act as channels of communication between diocesan clergy and local parishioners.¹⁴ And, when we see further efforts to reform the priesthood in the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, the

¹⁰ 'The So-Called "Canons of Edgar" (1005 × 8)', *Councils and Synods* 1, i, p. 331.

¹¹ 'Aelfric's Letter to Wulfsiges III', *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 208–9.

¹² 'Aelfric's First Old English Pastoral Letter for Wulfstan', *Councils and Synods* 1, i, p. 294.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 260–1. Pragmatism also appeared in a willingness to ordain priests whose knowledge was not up to scratch, hoping to make good the deficiency later. See 'On the Examination of Candidates for Ordination', in *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 424–5. The same sense of rising by steps is to be seen in warnings to learned priests not to scorn the less educated but to strive to improve them in 'The So-Called "Canons of Edgar"', in *Councils and Synods* 1, i, p. 318.

¹⁴ For the impact of the Conquest on the local clergy see A. Williams, *The English and the Norman Conquest* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 129–31.

ambitions of the reformers were different and in many ways more modest in their scope. They focused more narrowly on simony, lay proprietorial interests in ecclesiastical property, the sexual peccadilloes of the clergy and the excessive secularity of churchmen who hunted, hawked, frequented alehouses and preferred lay to clerical dress.¹⁵ Although twelfth-century bishops were creating new means to police the localities, aided increasingly by the watchfulness of growing numbers of archdeacons, the catechetical agenda of Aelfric and Wulfstan had largely vanished from the later legislation and would not properly re-emerge until the end of the twelfth century.¹⁶

We can get a fuller sense of the church hierarchy's altered priorities from a text composed by Gilbert of Limerick. *De Statu Ecclesiae* was written as a blueprint for the Irish church but seems to have been modelled nonetheless on English practice. It offers a basic vision of what a priest ought to be and ought to do, ascribing to him a limited role in teaching his flock and raising questions about how far he might be able (or concerned) to bridge the gap between diocese and parish.¹⁷ In this work, Gilbert goes back to brass tacks, listing comprehensively the things needed by a priest to perform his duties – he even thinks it necessary to mention the church building, the parish and the parochial flock as essential accoutrements of the aspirant minister.¹⁸ He also dwells on how the priest should be marked out from his parishioners by dress and lifestyle and goes into great detail about the proper performance of liturgy and sacraments.¹⁹

Teaching was expected of the priest but the scope of such instruction seems to have been restricted. He was to haul those outside the faith into the fold rather than deepening the understanding of those already within his flock, calling 'Jews, unbelievers and catechumens to the grace of baptism and heretics to the Catholic faith'.²⁰ The priest was also to construct a moral framework by instructing the baptised 'on how they may be armed with humility instead of haughtiness, with lowliness as opposed to vainglory, with kindness rather than envy, with gentleness instead of anger, with cheerfulness rather than sorrow, with generosity as opposed to excess'. He was 'to teach the faithful the days in the week

¹⁵ Twelfth-century synods have left few written traces. See C. R. Cheney, 'Statute-Making in the English Church during the Thirteenth Century', in *Medieval Texts and Studies* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 138–57. For an indication of the preoccupations of twelfth-century councils see William of Malmesbury's discussion of the Council of Westminster (1102), which focused especially on simony, lay ownership of churches and clerical dress and conduct, in *WM, GP*, pp. 118–21.

¹⁶ See A. Brown, *Church and Society in England, 1000–1500* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 45.

¹⁷ Brett, *English Church*, pp. 216–22.

¹⁸ Gilbert of Limerick, *Gille of Limerick (c.1070–1145): Architect of a Medieval Church*, ed. J. Fleming (Dublin, 2001), pp. 160–1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 155–7; 158–9. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

when they are to abstain and when they are to celebrate feasts'.²¹ The exhortations of the local clergy were thus designed to buttress morals and modify behaviour rather than to deepen understanding through exposition of scripture. 'Preaching' in the generally accepted sense seems to have been the lot, primarily, of bishops, episcopal nominees and (perhaps exceptionally) abbots, rather than being an expectation of local priests in the twelfth century.²² Gilbert's vision of the model parish priest is thus a conservative one, a conservatism borne, one suspects, of the rudimentary Latinity he anticipated among the church's local representatives.

The evidence of the first half of the thirteenth century, particularly the wave of synodal legislation for the dioceses, also indicates that the ambitious pastoral programme of the early eleventh did not permanently transform the religious life of the localities.²³ The Canons of Pseudo-Edgar (1005×8) had required parents to 'accustom their children to Christianity and teach them the paternoster and creed' warning that all who wished to lie in a consecrated grave or receive the sacrament must learn these things 'for he who will not learn it is not truly Christian'.²⁴ Yet similar injunctions still needed to be issued, and indeed were quite widespread, in the thirteenth century. Stephen Langton demanded that parishioners in the diocese of Canterbury learn the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and also the form of baptism (so that this could be enjoined by them in the vernacular *in extremis*).²⁵ These basic prescriptions formed the core of slightly later educational programmes for other dioceses as well (often with the requirement that they be explained in English). They were sometimes augmented, as in the case of Richard Poore's provisions for Salisbury (1217×19). He set out a simplified summary of the articles of the faith and nature of the sacraments, requiring

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²² Note the indication from Gerald of Wales that bishops and prelates (rather than local clergy) were expected to preach in GW, *TH*, p. 61. See also D. Postles, 'Lamps, Lights and Layfolk: "Popular" Devotion before the Black Death', *Journal of Medieval History*, 25 (1999), pp. 97–114 at pp. 103–4. We also occasionally glimpse abbots preaching to the lay community: Jocelin of Brakelond famously portrayed Abbot Samson of Bury St Edmunds preaching to the laity in English; so too did Odo, abbot of Battle, according to *Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, pp. 306–9. For roles of monks and Augustinian canons in pastoral care see the discussions in M. Chibnall, 'Monks and Pastoral Work: a Problem in Anglo-Norman history', *JEH*, 18 (1967), pp. 165–72; J. Burton, *The Monastic and Religious Orders in England, c. 1000–1300* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 48–9; C. Bynum, *Docere Verbo et Exemplo: an Aspect of Twelfth-Century Spirituality* (Missoula, MT, 1979).

²³ On synodal legislation and the problems of borrowing and inter-dependence see C. R. Cheney, *English Synodalia of the Thirteenth Century*, rev. edn (London, 1968). On the implementation of Lateran IV and its consequences see N. Tanner, 'The Fourth Lateran Council', in G. R. Evans (ed.), *A History of Pastoral Care* (London, 2000), pp. 112–25.

²⁴ 'The So-Called "Canons of Edgar"', in *Councils and Synods* i, i, pp. 321–2.

²⁵ 'Statutes of Canterbury 1 (1213 × 14)', in *Councils and Synods* ii, i, p. 31.

the clergy to instruct the laity frequently in the vernacular and expound to them the nature of the Trinity, as well as the Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, Ave Maria and baptismal formula.²⁶ Peter des Roches, in his provisions for the diocese of Winchester, added further detail to the basic programme, proposing that the laity be questioned during confession about the Incarnation, Passion and Trinity to make sure their knowledge was sound.²⁷ Yet, as late as the 1240s, Robert Grosseteste was worried that in the diocese of Lincoln these core articles of faith had not been fully absorbed by his flock. He suggested that fundamental elements of belief were not properly grasped by adults in the diocese and so, in default of parental instruction, priests must take on the task of teaching the articles of the faith to children of the parish.²⁸

There were exceptions to the generally bleak rule that one might deduce from the twelfth-century normative sources and thirteenth-century synodalia. We know that there were, for example, educated men in the ranks of the parish clergy.²⁹ Familiar and not so familiar examples are caught occasionally by incidental references in our narratives. We know that Orderic Vitalis was taught letters initially by an Anglo-Saxon priest named Siward in his native Shropshire.³⁰ We meet Sigar, parish priest of Newbald, Yorkshire, in the 1120s who had enough Latin to write up a vision experienced by a local child.³¹ And we might also recall the famous case of John of Salisbury. He began his career apprenticed to a parish priest

²⁶ 'Statutes of Salisbury 1 (1217 × 19)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, pp. 61, 68–69.

²⁷ 'Statutes of Winchester 1 (1224)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, pp. 134–6.

²⁸ Moorman, *Church Life*, p. 81; 'Statutes of Lincoln 1 (1239?)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 260. Grosseteste was keen that the commandments and deadly sins be expounded regularly to parishioners and also placed much greater emphasis on preaching than many of his episcopal predecessors. See Southern, *Robert Grosseteste*, pp. 237–71.

²⁹ The extent of clerical education in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries is disputed, though much of the discussion turns inevitably on a handful of examples and counter-examples. For early versions of the pessimistic view see Moorman, *Church Life*, pp. 24–5; R. Lennard, *Rural England 1086–1135* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 306–13, 329–35; Brett, *English Church*, pp. 218–19; E. Mason, 'The Role of the English Parishioner, 1100–1500', *JEH*, 27 (1976), 17–29; and more recently M. Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 54–8; Bartlett, *England*, pp. 378–87. The earliest surviving set of visitation returns, based on visitations conducted in 1222 by William, dean of Salisbury, found large numbers of priests with shaky Latin. Although most historians have used this evidence to illustrate the limitations of the local clergy, Michael Clanchy has noted that the ill-trained priests were removed and suggested that ignorance might thus not be the norm in Clanchy, *Memory to Written Record*, pp. 53–4. For the visitation returns see *Register of St Osmund*, ed. W. H. Rich Jones, 2 vols. (RS, 1883–4), i, pp. 275–314. For the growing expectation that the clergy be learned note also the decrees of Lateran IV (which reiterated the need articulated in Lateran III (1179) for schoolmasters to be appointed to train diocesan clergy) in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. and trans. N. P. Tanner, 2 vols. (Washington, 1990), i, pp. 240–1.

³⁰ OV, i, pp. 3–4.

³¹ 'The Vision of Orm', ed. H. Farmer, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 75 (1957), 72–82 at pp. 72–3.

who knew enough Latin to misuse it in his practice of certain divinatory arts in which he eagerly involved the young John.³²

The most consistent exceptions to the pattern of limited clerical Latinity lie not among the rural clergy but in urban centres where there were frequently richer pastoral resources. Here sophisticated evangelisation of the lay community might be possible, especially in those towns served by cathedrals. As much is suggested by the sermons of Herbert Losinga, bishop of Norwich, which contain detailed guidance amounting almost to outlines for a lay religious vocation. He offered an exposition of Christ's sacrifice for the benefit of the ordinary faithful, how its fruits were to be reaped through baptism, the possibilities of recovery from sin through penance, the role of saints and angels as mediators of grace.³³ There is also a telling assumption that this urban audience will already be sensitised to the perils of sin, that the message of the church had already taken effect. Hence Herbert expounded a quite sophisticated redemptive theology in which almsgiving and the works of mercy were seemingly being offered to lay men and women as means by which they might handle sin.³⁴ Herbert encouraged his hearers to 'abound in the works of mercy' and counselled that wealth given away on earth stored up treasure in heaven.³⁵ This teaching was in turn wrapped up in colourful rhetoric about Judgement 'because the world is stricken with age', a faintly apocalyptic flourish designed to move the faithful to amend their lives soon.³⁶

Those living in the rural hinterland of cathedrals would not have been shut off from the sort of teaching offered by bishops like Herbert but they would probably have experienced it in a more dilute form. Evidence from the dioceses of Lincoln and Exeter suggests that regular pentecostal processions would bring the faithful from their rural parishes to the cathedral. Armed with oblations, these annual pilgrimages connected financial support for the church with penitence and, most probably, the preaching of a sermon.³⁷ We also need to remember that the sorts of teachings propounded in quite complex form by bishops like Herbert would often, even in the absence of regular preaching, have been made available in the localities through visual media. Only fragments of central medieval church art survive (chiefly wall paintings) but there is still sufficient to suggest that there were similarities of style and content between parish church imagery and the art of cathedral centres and monasteries.³⁸ Great and lesser

³² JS, *Pol.*, 1, pp. 164–5. ³³ Herbert Losinga, *Life, Letters and Sermons*, pp. 28–9, 40–1, 67–8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.; Harper-Bill, 'Searching for Salvation', pp. 20–1.

³⁵ Herbert Losinga, *Life, Letters and Sermons*, pp. 26–7, 123–5. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 425–7.

³⁷ Brown, *Church and Society*, p. 46; D. M. Owen, *Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1981), pp. 103–4.

³⁸ See for examples E. W. Tristram, *English Medieval Wall Painting: the Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1944), pp. 27–41; Brown, *Church and Society*, pp. 48–50.

churches alike continued to function as 'books' for the illiterate and to lay out ideas about sin, judgement, resurrection and redemption through representations of the Fall, the Passion narrative and the Doom.

So the picture here is mixed. We find in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries a religious culture in which the laity were driving the ongoing development of parishes and local clergy were proliferating. The learning of these men might be limited, but exiguous parochial teaching might be supplemented by the preaching of bishops and abbots and by a symbolic field of rituals and images within the local church. This produced a religious world in many ways significantly different from that of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, its heart being more collective ritual action than preaching and catechesis. That proper liturgical and sacramental observance was secured in the emerging parishes was the primary and dominating objective of the twelfth-century institutional church. It was through this body of shared ritual that the community of the faithful was to be held together, a common currency of rituals enacted in similar ecclesiastical settings ensuring that the language, practices and iconography of Christianity soaked the thought of the ordinary laity. And yet this emphasis on praxis also guaranteed variety in the ways religious activity was understood. The official messages communicated through this oral-symbolic culture, the values attached to the rituals, the ideas encoded in the images would never be received by parishioners with anything like the uniformity senior churchmen wished. And this predicament was intensified by the absence of 'regularising' strategies such as frequent catechesis and preaching undertaken by clergymen consistently equal to such demanding tasks. In consequence, we have to think of local or 'parish' Christianity as something more variegated than the normative sources (and especially the rich synodal legislation of the early thirteenth century) wanted it to be. The institutional structures and ritual scaffolding of Christianity were indeed similar across the localities but, within these frameworks, could exist belief which was more fluid and localised, exposed to communal and individual remakings.

IMAGINING PAGANISM

Yet how far could this flexible and locally varied system accommodate patterns of belief which were not 'Christian' at all? Was there enough flexibility in local religion for pagan beliefs and practices to endure as a sub-culture within the dominant culture? Answering such questions demands that we engage with a series of issues of evidence and historiography and that we clear a path through the tangled underbrush of debate around the issue of pagan survivals. Framing answers also demands that we think carefully about language – both 'ours' and 'theirs' – and that we

subject that tidy binary – pagan/Christian – to rather closer scrutiny than it sometimes receives.

We must turn first to the sources themselves and the agendas animating their production because these have tremendous capacity to foster illusions. Although the evidence for surviving paganism emerges from a variety of genres, much of it comes from normative sources produced by churchmen keen to extirpate all vestiges of such belief and practice. Among the richest of these texts are penitentials, designed to enforce orthodoxy and orthopraxis through punitive tariff penances. And yet for all the richness of this material, the prohibitions of the penitentials are an uncertain guide to the persistence of paganism and cannot be read as a commentary on social practices.³⁹ Their authors felt an obligation to equip the priest with a comprehensive manual of the sins he might encounter and so the rare offence inevitably jostles with the frequent misdemeanour with no indication of relative frequencies.

Connected to this problem, of our inability to deduce from penitentials the relative frequencies of different ‘sinful’ beliefs and practices, is a second: the deep literary indebtedness of most new penitentials to established handbooks of penance. Age-old canons tended to be reassembled in new texts, recapitulating injunctions against veneration of trees, stones and springs, ritual uses of animal blood, the keeping of pagan holy days, the varied works of diviners, enchanter and sorcerers.⁴⁰ Such a literary practice gave rise to a more oblique relationship between the text and the social context in which it functioned. That particular prohibitions were selected might hold some significance, but the pervasiveness of

³⁹ See above, pp. 8–9.

⁴⁰ Against worshipping rocks, stones and fountains see for example *Poenitentie Casinense*, in *Die Bussbücher und die Bussdisciplin der Kirche*, ed. H. J. Schmitz (Mainz, 1883), p. 412; *Poenitentie Anundel*, *ibid.*, p. 462; Pseudo-Gregory, *Das Poenitentie Pseudo-Gregorii Eine kritische Edition*, ed. F. Kerff, *Freiburger Beiträge zur Mittelalterlichen geschichte* (Frankfurt, 1992), p. 183; *Poenitentie Pseudo-Egberti*, in *Die Bussordnungen der abenländischen Kirche*, ed. F. W. H. Wasserschleben (Halle, 1851), p. 327; Regino of Prüm, *Reginonis Abbatis Prumiensis Libri Duo de Synodaliibus Causis de Disciplinis Ecclesiasticis*, ed. F. W. H. Wasserschleben, 2 vols. (Leipzig 1840), I, p. 365; *ibid.*, II, pp. 366, 373; Burchard of Worms, *Decretum*, ed. J. Migne, *PL*, 140, cols. 537–1058 at cols. 833–7, 964. For injunctions against drinking animal blood see *Poenitentie Casinense*, in *Die Bussbücher*, p. 415; *Das Poenitentie Pseudo-Gregorii*, p. 185; against keeping certain days as holy, *ibid.*; against observing the kalends of January, including rites involving dressing as stags or climbing on roofs, *Poenitentie Casinense*, in *Die Bussbücher*, p. 413; *Das Poenitentie Pseudo-Gregorii*, p. 180; *Canones Poenitentieales quo Ordine Succedunt Tractatus*, ed. A. Augustinus (Tarraconae, 1582), p. 41; Regino of Prüm, *De Synodaliibus Causis*, II, p. 372; Burchard, *Decretum*, cols. 835–6, 965; against rites performed during the changing phases of the moon: *Poenitentie Anundel*, in *Die Bussbücher*, p. 463; *Das Poenitentie Pseudo-Gregorii*, p. 180; Regino of Prüm, *De Synodaliibus Causis*, II, p. 372; Burchard, *Decretum*, cols. 835, 837–8, 960; against curing children’s ills by dragging them through the earth and placing them in ovens: *Poenitentie Pseudo-Egberti*, in *Die Bussordnungen*, p. 335; *Poenitentie Anundel*, in *Die Bussbücher*, p. 464; *Poenitentie Casinense*, in *Die Bussbücher*, p. 412; *Das Poenitentie Pseudo-Gregorii*, p. 180; Regino of Prüm, *De Synodaliibus Causis*, II, p. 368; Burchard, *Decretum*, cols. 835, 964, 974.

borrowing still ensures that the penitential does not offer easy access to beliefs and practices with which it seems, on the surface, to have been in contact.⁴¹ There are, of course, examples which buck this trend. The *Corrector* of Burchard of Worms, written in the early eleventh century, was infused with a great deal of more specific detail, which may indeed have reflected local religious belief and practice in south-western Germany. But this is very much the exception rather than rule. Most penitentials, including those composed and circulating in England, have different compositional characteristics and seem to have drawn their injunctions from established texts rather than observation of social realities.

Responding to these difficulties, Yitzak Hen, in his assessment of Merovingian religious culture, has offered a cautious estimation of what such texts might disclose. He is doubtful about the idea of living paganism even in this early Christian period but argues convincingly that fear of paganism persisted among churchmen long after the reality had largely vanished. And it thus continued to stimulate the reproduction of the old anathemas.⁴² This plausible argument becomes even more compelling if we apply it in the central middle ages where even the fear of paganism was becoming vestigial. It is noticeable that in our period 'pagan', as a description of malpractice within Christendom, was coming to be used less frequently, ceding ground to 'magical', 'superstitious' and (most potently) 'heretical' as the more commonplace charges levelled against wrong belief.

We can see this if we turn to the substantially reworked penitential handbooks of the later twelfth century and the synodal legislation of the thirteenth. Both pay far less attention to paganism than earlier penitentials and law codes. Robert of Flamborough offered in his manual only a handful of condemnations of worship of stones, fountains and springs and 'pagan rites', abandoning most of the anti-pagan legislation in favour of a broader programme of moral reform.⁴³ Bartholomew Iscanus's handbook, written in 1150×70, exhibits the same tendencies, having far less to say about pagan practice – for example there is nothing here about veneration of rocks, trees or stones – than the penitentials of the eleventh century.⁴⁴ Later synodal statutes also show only limited concern about the

⁴¹ See D. Harmening, *Superstitio. Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlichtheologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1979); and for a more positive assessment of the value of penitentials see Schmitt, 'Religion, Folklore and Society', p. 381.

⁴² Y. Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481–751* (Leiden, 1995).

⁴³ Robert of Flamborough, *Liber Penitentialis*, pp. 260–1, 241.

⁴⁴ For a variant version represented by a single manuscript in which is interpolated a series of proscriptions of 'pagan' practices see above, p. 65 n. 161.

possibility of living or recrudescant paganism, injunctions against cultic practices such as worship of rocks, trees and fountains appearing in only a handful of these texts and then comprising only a very small fraction of the whole.⁴⁵ Tellingly, when they resurface in Bishop Quinel's statutes for the diocese of Exeter in 1287, the bishop associates the rites not with heathens but with the activities of heretics who he thought had resurrected them.⁴⁶

We must also guard against paying too much heed even to these ghostly remains of paganism because a considerable difficulty lies in the assumption that meanings attached to the adjectives 'pagan' and 'heathen' were at all stable across the early and central middle ages. 'Pagan' could mean very different things in different periods, especially as the acquaintance of churchmen with 'living paganism' disappeared. Even across the indistinct boundary dividing late antiquity from the early middle ages, R. A. Markus has observed that 'pagan' altered its meaning for churchmen who employed the term.⁴⁷ Although Gregory the Great inherited from Augustine a language for describing those outside the faith in which *pagani* were unregenerate believers in false gods, Gregory himself inhabited a world which felt markedly more Christian than that of Augustine. So for him the term *pagani* was more expansive, embracing not only, as Professor Markus puts it, 'real thick-blooded pagans' but also 'nominal rude Christians'.

It was this broader range of meanings that 'pagan' tended to carry with it into the central middle ages. Here the label (when used to describe activities of those within the borders of Christendom) could be stuck on a range of practices deemed unacceptable by legislating churchmen. So pagan cult might be long-dead, but the fiery rhetoric of bishops committed to tighter surveillance of the parishes and the inculcation of credal Christianity could give it a new lease of life. Thus Adam of Eynsham, as he approvingly likened Hugh of Lincoln to Martin of Tours (c.316–97), presented both bishops as hammers of pagan malpractice. We find that, like Martin, Hugh had 'put down magical and superstitious abominations everywhere'.⁴⁸ Specifically we discover that he had suppressed votive offerings at streams in Wycombe, Berkhamstead and other places and

⁴⁵ 'Statutes of Worcester 1 (1240)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 303; 'Statutes of Wells (1258)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 622. Against idolatry: 'Council of Lambeth (1281)', in *Councils and Synods II*, ii, p. 902.

⁴⁶ *Councils and Synods II*, ii, p. 1044.

⁴⁷ R. A. Markus, 'Gregory the Great's Pagans', in Gameson (ed.), *Belief and Culture*, pp. 23–34; R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 1–34.

⁴⁸ AE, II, p. 201. On St Martin of Tours's efforts to suppress false cults see A. Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge, 1997), p. 19.

that he had put a stop to the veneration of a dead criminal at Northampton.⁴⁹ And yet this conflation in Adam's hagiography deliberately blurs differences in the threats faced by the two saints which another narrative, composed by William of Newburgh, lays bare. We learn from William that the cult of the criminal corpse was not the centre of anything resembling pagan devotion. Rather, local people, encouraged by some of their clergy and by rumours of signs and wonders, were holding up the dead man as a miracle-working martyr who could bring aid through the instruments of his execution and through the blood-spattered earth where he met his death.⁵⁰ Here then was an argument *within* Christianity about the nature of sanctity, in which a zealous bishop contested the claims of local priests and people that an executed man 'died for the cause of justice and piety' and showed his merits in wondrous signs.⁵¹ Beneath the trappings of synchronising hagiography was not a battle against pagan cult as tackled by Martin but a struggle to define what it meant to be a saint.⁵² The battle for the faith had moved on, even if it was fought still with ancient rhetorical weapons.

Despite the intractability of the sources and the inherent difficulties of discussing pagan religions, the idea that 'paganism' lived into the middle ages has, with varying degrees of sophistication, been reiterated by a number of historians of medieval and early modern religion.⁵³ Lingering attachment to the notion that paganism in some sense survived within the dominant Christian culture has continued to inform the work of distinguished historians such as Jean Delumeau and, more recently, Carlo Ginzburg.⁵⁴ Certain shared assumptions tend to unite such authors and incline them towards a similar view. Most important here is a tendency to see the evidence in a long perspective and subject it to what Ginzburg has called a 'morphological approach'. This means that similarities in the form of beliefs and practices are given priority because these might indicate shared origins, allowing deep counter-cultural

⁴⁹ AE, II, pp. 200–1.

⁵⁰ For further discussion of this and related cases see D. Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (London, 2000), p. 160; Ward, *Miracles*, pp. 129–30.

⁵¹ WN, II, p. 472.

⁵² E. W. Kemp, *Canonization and Authority in the Western Church* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 56–106; Finucane, *Miracles*, pp. 35–8 and also see also R. Bartlett, 'The Hagiography of Angevin England', in P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd (eds.), *Thirteenth-Century England: Proceedings of the Newcastle-Upon-Tyne Conference, 1993* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 37–52.

⁵³ See N. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: an Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch Hunt* (London, 1975); R. Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: their Nature and their Legacy* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 284–31.

⁵⁴ C. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. R. Rosenthal (London, 1990). See also for a recent discussion L. J. R. Milis (ed.), *The Pagan Middle Ages*, trans. T. Guest (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1–12.

continuities in belief to be detected. Hence much comes to hinge on the identification of motifs and rituals which have antecedents in the pre-Christian past and on folk stories and images which seem to encode values and beliefs which are not Christian.

But in the modern historiography just as in the ancient, paganism is often in the beholder's eye. It is very significant that we know relatively little about the ancient pagan beliefs and practices which are alleged to have survived into the middle ages. This obscurity makes it easier to see vestiges of the pagan in images, rituals and stories which are not explicitly Christian. The very vagueness of 'the pagan' as an analytical category allows a range of medieval cultural fragments to be retro-fitted into an alternative, non-Christian 'system' of belief. We can take an example here from church art. It is true that morally ambiguous carved images of the green man and *sheela-na-gig*, an explicit representation of a naked woman, cover many parish churches. And they may indeed be *non-Christian* in their origins.⁵⁵ But it does not follow logically that they represent vestiges of paganism and still less are we entitled to assume that they were understood in this way by those who cut or saw them. Even if such images had their origins in ancient cult (itself a very major supposition), they may have become disarticulated from the system of belief which originally produced them. To speak of 'survival' is to beg questions about what exactly had survived.

This raises a further interpretative problem. Exponents of pagan survival theories have tended to fasten onto deep continuities in religious culture and to neglect often far more significant changes. To take a very obvious example: we know that ritual sacrifice of animals survived the conversion but its significance may have shifted over time. Valued once as an offering to the old gods it was famously reinterpreted by Pope Gregory as an act of thanksgiving to the one God.⁵⁶ We do not need to take a view of this case of possible 'survivals' but we can already see the importance of assessing the persistence of particular ritual acts in the larger context of dramatic cultural change.⁵⁷ This is especially vital, because it is only in the wider field of language, image and gesture, at a given moment in time, that individual words, representations and rituals gained their meaning. To isolate them and to privilege morphology leads to the construction of new fields of meaning based on very difficult and contestable judgements about similarity. This might rescue ancient images and rituals from

⁵⁵ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, pp. 310–14.

⁵⁶ Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969), p. 108–9.

⁵⁷ See also criticism of the attention paid by historians of the judicial ordeal to its putative pagan roots in R. Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: the Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 153–6.

connotations applied by medieval churchmen, but substitutes for them meanings of the modern author's highly subjective election. The legitimacy of such a move depends in large measure upon how large a gulf divided the churchman-author from the peasant communities in which 'pagan' belief and practice might have been sustained. If we think that a 'Christian' elite of churchmen moved in a different world from 'pagan' peasants, the historiographical-anthropological rescue mission can be justified more easily. If we believe both groups existed in a substantially common culture it becomes much harder to defend. We must, for a time, suspend judgement on this issue because, before addressing it, we must examine some of the other dangers of hunting paganism in the central middle ages.

Of great importance here are the pagan ghosts which Christianity itself summoned up. The means by which Christianisation was effected itself ensured that paganism might appear to survive because syncretistic conversion strategies sought to incorporate fragments of the old religion into the new. We know that, as a dominant culture, paganism succumbed quite rapidly to the Christian onslaught: public pagan cults collapsed relatively quickly as kings and aristocracies switched allegiance to the new religion.⁵⁸ Christianisation in the localities may have moved at a slower pace, but even here the process was powerful, propelled by missionaries operating with the support of elites.⁵⁹ The strategy at work throughout was one of deliberate gradualism. Destruction of pagan cults was not to be achieved through sudden confrontation but by stealth. The old religion was dismembered and, while some elements were suppressed, others were appropriated and reinvented for Christian ends.⁶⁰ So sites of worship and ritual forms might persist but, now reconstituted and re-contextualised as temples, so to speak, were turned to the church's use. Christianity emerged from the era of conversions, as Peter Brown has put

⁵⁸ Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, pp. 284–7; also R. Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: a History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 408–15, 422–7. For further discussion see G. R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1981), pp. 174–7; H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (London, 1991), pp. 22–30; G. Bonner, 'Religion in Anglo-Saxon England', in S. Gilley and W. J. Shiels (eds.), *A History of Religion in Britain: Practice and Belief from Pre-Roman Times to the Present* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 24–44; D. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London, 1992), esp. pp. 1–43; A. Meaney, 'Aelfric and Idolatry', *Journal of Religious History*, 13 (1984–5), pp. 119–35; I. Wood, *The Missionary Life* (London, 2001), pp. 254–6. Note also Dorothy Whitelock's point that, although Archbishop Oda based his constitutions of 941 × 6 on the Legatine Council of 786 he omitted condemnations of heathenism, thus suggesting that paganism was no longer perceived to be a threat. See *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 67–8.

⁵⁹ On the spread of Christianity see Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, pp. 51–113; Blair and Sharpe, *Pastoral Care*, pp. 2–10, 267–84.

⁶⁰ A. Murray, 'Missionaries and Magic in Dark Age Europe', in L. K. Little and B. H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 92–104.

it, 'articulated by a network of chapels and other cult locations which were sometimes very ancient'.⁶¹ A pre-existing 'sacralised landscape' was re-used, but Christian saints, holy wells, shrines and churches sprang up where pagan groves, springs and cult centres had once stood.⁶² John Blair has similarly suggested, in his magisterial study of Anglo-Saxon religious culture, that 'old ways of doing things' – rituals, practices, even magic – might persist but articulated within Christian frameworks of thought.⁶³ It does not follow in any of this that the preservation of the site, the name or even the form of a ritual entailed conservation of beliefs once attached to them.⁶⁴ If paganism 'survived' the processes of Christianisation, it might only be to endure a living death in a world claimed by another faith.

There is also no reason to think that fresh transfusions of pagan Viking blood in the late Anglo-Saxon period should alter these interim conclusions about survivability.⁶⁵ It is true that there was renewed anti-pagan legislation after fresh Viking settlement in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. The Northumbrian Priests' Law nervously enjoined all to 'love and honour one God and zealously hold one Christian faith and cast out every heathen practice'. More specifically, it also condemned sacrifice, divination, witchcraft, worship of idols or the making of sanctuaries around stones and trees (all on pain of substantial fines).⁶⁶ General injunctions against 'heathenism' and instructions to keep Christian holy days reappeared in the Laws of Edward and Guthrum (1002×8) and were reiterated in similar form in the so-called Canons of Edgar (1005×8), along with instructions to 'abstain on feast days from heathen songs and

⁶¹ See also J. Blair, 'Churches in the Early English Landscape: social and cultural contexts', in Blair and Pyrah, *Church Archaeology*, pp. 6–8; Brown, *Cult of Saints*, pp. 1–13. See also V. I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 87–172, 393–407; J. B. Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1972), pp. 45–100.

⁶² P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2003), p. 104.

⁶³ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp. 166–81. For his careful summation that in the eighth and ninth centuries, religious culture in the Anglo-Saxon countryside was 'unorthodox and compromised', 'broad-based and well-integrated' yet, in essence, Christian, see p. 179.

⁶⁴ St Cuthman was associated with a sacred stone at Steyning (on which, it was said, the saint would sit) and St Ivo had been linked to a well at Slepe but, as Diana Webb has argued, in neither case should an appearance of continuity imply a kernel of living paganism within the shell of Christianised cult. See Wood, *Pilgrimage*, p. 32; WM, *GP*, pp. 319–20. Even St Modwenna, whose cult was constructed by Geoffrey of Burton for his Benedictine house, had conferred on a spring the happy facility of transforming water into beer. See Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of Modwenna*, pp. 178–9.

⁶⁵ It has been suggested by John Blair that this new pagan blood might have encouraged some reformers such as Aelfric and Wulfstan of York to tighten up further the regulation of local cultic practices. See Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p. 481.

⁶⁶ 'The Northumbrian Priests' Law', in *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 461–3. The date of this text is contested but a recent case has been made for relatively late composition in the period 1023 × 57. See Blair, *Church*, p. 490 and n. 286.

games of the devil'.⁶⁷ Yet much of this was about secularity rather than paganism and, in any event, Viking paganism, like Anglo-Saxon paganism before it, seems to have possessed a short half-life. Strictures against heathen belief and practice had largely subsided by the mid-eleventh century.⁶⁸ By this point, broader legislative efforts to defend the sacred from the encroachment of the profane through irreverent behaviour, misuse of churches and failure to observe fasts and feasts were dominant themes of newly produced normative texts, rather than sustained action against a religious rival.⁶⁹ Paganism, as Peter Brown put it, may have 'metamorphosed as much as it died', but we need not ascribe to its 'surviving' elements, now relocated in Christian matrices, any significant level of autonomy.⁷⁰

Illusions of religious continuity across the pagan and Christian centuries might also be created in another way. They might be fostered by the persistence through the pre- and post-conversion periods of a great range of human necessities and desires which could only be met through appeal to supernatural agencies. From the quest for success in battle to the hope of a plentiful harvest, it seems that pagan practices had come to serve 'the gamut of social needs' in pre-Christian culture.⁷¹ Through the processes of conversion, these needs came to be articulated and met by Christian or Christianised strategies. So here, we do indeed find decided cultural stability. But it is one which cannot meaningfully be identified as a 'religious' continuity because it was engendered by the constant practical needs and desires of men and women struggling in a hostile world. Ronald Hutton has pressed a similar point in his consideration of the ritual year by arguing that seasonal rites were shaped by larger social and cultural forces.⁷² Taken in long perspective, he found that deep continuities were at work in the ritual year's rhythms but that these similarities did not

⁶⁷ 'The So-Called Laws of Edward and Guthrum', *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 304, 306, 310; 'The So-Called "Canons of Edgar"', *Councils and Synods* 1, i, p. 321. See also similar injunctions in other late Anglo-Saxon lawcodes: 'King Æthelred's Laws Issued at King's Enham (v and vi Æthelred)', *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 366, 371; 'Selections from the Laws of Cnut (I and II Cnut)', *Councils and Synods* 1, i, pp. 468–506.

⁶⁸ See D. M. Wilson, 'The Vikings' Relationship with Christianity in Northern England', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 30 (1967), 37–46; G. Fellows Jensen, 'The Vikings' Relationship with Christianity in the British Isles', in J. Knirk (ed.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Viking Congress* (Larkollen, Norway, 1985), pp. 295–8.

⁶⁹ A useful comparison is the Christianisation of the Cumans (where the process broadened to tackle customs, practices and even dress deemed 'pagan') as discussed in N. Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom: Jews, Muslims and 'Pagans' in Medieval Hungary, c.1000–c.1300* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 259–67.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Cult of Saints*, p. 202. ⁷¹ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, p. 29.

⁷² See Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, pp. 426–7; Loyn, *English Church*, pp. 265–6; E. Miller and J. Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change, 1086–1348* (Harlow, 1978), p. 109.

necessarily constitute enduring beliefs. Rather they were the product of unchanging agricultural frameworks and the cycle of the seasons within which shifting belief tended to be confined.

These enduring needs exacted a price as the missionaries worked to spread Christianity but the price was not that elements of paganism survived. We can see that the new religion was in certain ways transformed by the social needs it was obliged to serve. Christian culture emerged in a 'vernacularised' guise as Anglo-Saxon Christianity became inextricably tangled into worldly necessities and the desires of its followers. This can be discerned in recurrent and concerted efforts at disentangling launched by reform-minded churchmen. Throughout the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries and beyond we see legislation designed to desecularise the church and reclaim for Christianity the 'otherworldliness' it seemed to have lost.⁷³ This was a far deeper and more pervasive concern than living paganism. We can also perceive that the encounter with varied social needs changed Christianity because its claims to universality were inevitably compromised as 'vernacular' religion emerged in subtly different forms in different places. Particular interactions of church teachings with local beliefs and needs, varied receptions of official messages, even different landscapes and economic structures continued to sustain and generate diversity.

So how should we take our leave of this debate about pagan survival? We need to accept that reflections on early and central medieval religion which try to reach beyond the life of institutions and elites inevitably drift into imagining the shape of a *terra incognita* which can never realistically come into clear view. The sources simply do not survive in sufficient quantity to allow us to map much of what is often called 'popular belief' for the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Indeed they are few enough to make the task difficult even for the thirteenth century. But we do get glimpses of religious life in the emerging parishes in those moments when the sources are unusually rich and detailed. In turning to this material, our preoccupation must not be with the lineage of particular beliefs and practices but with the ways in which they functioned at a given moment

⁷³ See A. Thacker, 'Bede's Ideal of Reform', in P. Wormald, D. Bullough and R. Collins (eds.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 130–53; C. Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils, c.650–850* (Cambridge, 1995); A. Thacker, 'Monks, Preaching and Pastoral Care in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in Blair and Sharpe, *Pastoral Care*, pp. 137–70; P. Wormald, 'Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in R. T. Farrell (ed.), *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England: Papers in Honour of the 1300th anniversary of the Birth of Bede, given at Cornell University in 1973 and 1974* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 32–90.

in larger religious systems.⁷⁴ As we have seen, to break a culture apart, to trace the individual origins of practices, images, stories, to label them 'pagan' or 'Christian', risks reducing a complex organic system to an assemblage of disarticulated parts. And this will tell us little, if anything, about the inner workings of religious culture at any given place and any given moment.

PAGAN SURVIVALS?

In exploring evidence for pagan survivals, we might begin by considering some telling silences: instances of belief and practice which seem to us to preserve vestiges of the pagan but which were not identified as such by medieval churchmen. Modern historians have recurrently found pagan echoes in a range of medieval practices from festivals created around seemingly archaic cores (such as midsummer fires lit on St John's eve) to saints' cults thought thinly to conceal pre-Christian elements (for example legends of decapitated saints which, so it has been suggested, applied a hagiographical veneer to pagan head cults).⁷⁵ And yet one of the most striking things about these practices and stories is that contemporary churchmen, usually alert to the false, erroneous and heretical, seldom saw anything pagan in them.⁷⁶ Stories of revenants, the dead who rose from the grave in their own partially decayed corpses and pestered or even attacked the living, present another case of beliefs which might seem pagan but were not identified as such by any of the churchmen who wrote about them.⁷⁷ William of Malmesbury, Walter Map, William of Newburgh and Geoffrey of Burton, all of whom took an interest in such things, had the lexicon of anti-pagan condemnations at their fingertips but did not make much use of it.

⁷⁴ A useful case study of this kind of problem is the mix of Christian and non-Christian language in the spells and charms of the Anglo-Saxon leechbooks as discussed in Jolly, *Popular Religion*, pp. 96–131; Wilson, *Magical Universe*, p. 12; J. D. Niles, 'Pagan Survivals and Popular Belief', in M. Godden and M. Lapidge (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 126–46 at pp. 135–6.

⁷⁵ See the discussion in Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, pp. 408–15, 426–7 for a critique of this view; also see J. A. F. Thomson, 'St Eiluned of Brecon and her Cult', *Studies in Church History*, 30 (1993), 117–25.

⁷⁶ For Augustine the idea that the dead returned savoured too much of paganism and the cult of ancestors which led him to argue that the dead might seem to return but in fact be contrivances of evil angels. See A. Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages: volume II, the Curse on Self-Murder* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 471 ff; Schmitt, *Ghosts*, pp. 17–22.

⁷⁷ On revenants see N. Caciola, 'Wraiths and Revenants in Medieval Culture', *Past and Present*, 35 (1996), 3–45; P. Barber, *Vampires, Burial and Death: Folklore and Reality* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); H. R. Ellis Davidson, 'The Restless Dead: Icelandic Ghost Stories', in H. R. Ellis Davidson and W. M. S. Russell (eds.), *The Folklore of Ghosts* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 155–75; N. K. Chadwick, *Norse Ghosts: a Study in the Draugr and the Haugbui* (Cambridge, 1946).

William of Malmesbury was most alarmed by the notion that the dead might rise from the grave and mocked the clergy of the New Minster in Winchester for thinking that the spirit of King Alfred resumed its own dead body and wandered the church by night.⁷⁸ For William, the tale was a useful stick with which to beat unreformed seculars for their 'inbred credulity' but he painted this simply as foolishness and ignorance. Indeed, deprived of an immediate political motive for his interpretation, William was not above entertaining beliefs about revenants himself. In *Gesta Pontificum* he reported without demur how workmen were obliged to sink the body of one Brihtwald in a bog because his wandering corpse had troubled them.⁷⁹

This openness to the idea that the dead could wander was in line with the views of William's clerical peers, who did not condemn the beliefs about revenants even if they frequently found themselves unable to explain the phenomenon. They also did not blanch at countermeasures which were far from conventionally Christian. Although some revenants were indeed driven off with holy water or laid with a cross, others were 'drowned', dismembered, decapitated or burnt.⁸⁰ Even the usually circumspect William of Newburgh reported freely how in one case monks rolled up their sleeves, dug up a revenant and put the troublesome corpse to the torch.⁸¹ When condemnation did come, it was, as Hugh, bishop of Lincoln, put it, because such practices were indecent and improper, not because they were in any sense pagan.⁸² Exactly why revenants wandered the earth, whether by demonic power or by spirits re-entering their own bodies, was not resolved by these churchmen, who tended to leave the issue open. But in narrating something of the rich complexity of unofficial belief, they did not think they were lifting the lid on lurking paganism. They illustrate that, between normative and condemned belief and praxis, there existed a substantial space in which extra-ecclesial ideas could flourish. The willingness of so many churchmen to discuss these so expansively and neutrally suggests the desire to control them was hardly strong and that, while the revenants themselves might be a danger, belief in their existence was not.

⁷⁸ WM, GR, I, pp. 134–5. See also for later versions of the story *Liber Monasterii de Hyda: comprising a chronicle of the affairs of England from the settlement of the Saxons to the reign of Cnut and a chartulary of the Abbey of Hyde, in Hampshire AD 455–1023*, ed. E. Edwards (RS, 1866), pp. 61–2; 76.

⁷⁹ WM, GP, pp. 411–12; see also another case identified in G. Graham, 'Authority, Challenge and Community in Three Gloucestershire Saints' Cults', in D. Mowbray, R. Purdie and I. Wei (eds.), *Authority and Community in the Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 117–38 at p. 127 n.48.

⁸⁰ See for example WN, II, pp. 474–482; Map, pp. 202–9; Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of Modwenna*, pp. 192–9.

⁸¹ WN, II, pp. 481–2. ⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 474–5.

In the light of this, how might we evaluate the ‘best evidence’ for surviving paganism – those cases where churchmen did indeed identify and condemn pagan ideas and practices which seemed to menace the faith? How should we situate such stories in the framework we have begun to establish? Rare instances which seem to suggest persistence of pagan cult within the British Isles can be excavated from medieval historical and hagiographical writing, though the richest stories are late, recorded in the thirteenth century, and significantly tend to be located by English writers in the Scottish borders.

Two stories are preserved in the chronicle produced by the Augustinian canons of Lanercost, a complex text whose composition calls for examination even before we reach the stories of alleged ‘pagan’ ritual. The chronicle in the form we have it was the product of a canon-copyist’s pen but the contents have a more tangled genealogy, which is relevant to our purposes. The Lanercost redactor stitched together two older narratives (one running from 1201 to 1297, the other from 1297 to 1346) into a single text, but the original authors were not canons but friars, the compiler of the earlier portion probably being attached to the northern Franciscan house at Haddington.⁸³ This author, thought by A. G. Little to be Richard of Durham, wrote not just about high politics and church affairs but also about religious life in the north, seeding his history with moralising stories and *exempla* designed to edify his peers and perhaps serve as a means to season their preaching. This evangelizing context helps to explain his horror at an outbreak in 1268 of profane rites which he claimed had been ‘revived’ in Lothian. He explained that, after a pestilence had afflicted the herds, local people had kindled special fires through which the cattle were driven and set up statues of Priapus in the fields.⁸⁴ When called to account, the lord of the town denied responsibility for the events and ‘pleaded for his innocence that he was absent and uninformed when they perpetrated all of these things and he said that “until the month of June the animals of others were sick and expired, mine were all healthy, but now daily two or three die, such that there are few left for husbandry”’.⁸⁵

On the face of it, this might look like a revival of pagan practices – and this is clearly the impression that the chronicler wanted to fix in the minds of readers or hearers. But this story of living paganism is perhaps not what it seems. There were precedents for reversions during the conversion

⁸³ See A. G. Little, *Franciscan Papers, Lists and Documents* (Manchester, 1943), pp. 42–54. On the rich anecdotal evidence for northern religious history and the many *exempla* which are intruded into the chronicle see Gransden, *Historical Writing c.550–c.1307*, pp. 496–500.

⁸⁴ *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 85. ⁸⁵ *ibid.*

period, Bede recording instances of newly Christianised peoples abandoning their faith for the old religion during the plagues of the seventh century.⁸⁶ Yet here the chronicler does not present social memory as the reservoir from which the aberrant ritual had been rescued. Instead, he blamed Cistercian monks for teaching the heathen rites, claiming that a lay brother had made an idolatrous image at the entrance to the yard of the monastery near a place called Fenton and, dipping a dog's testicles in holy water, had employed this as an aspersion to protect the animals.⁸⁷ He also warned that 'certain bestial men, monks in dress but not in mind, taught the common people of the country to raise fire by rubbing together firewood and to erect a statue of Priapus'.⁸⁸ This visceral attack on local Cistercians fits with the chronicler's hostility to monks in the rest of this portion of the work. We hear of a revenant from Paisley who wears the habit of the black monks as he terrorises local folk and we find that, when the townsfolk rioted at Norwich in 1272, Richard of Durham (uniquely among the chroniclers of his day) took their part rather than that of the monks they had attacked.⁸⁹

Yet we cannot simply leave it at that, seeing the story as a confection to blacken the name of religious rivals. There is no reason to doubt that unofficial apotropaic practices were used by individuals and communities to supply help in moments of crisis or as a means to fulfil otherwise unrealisable desires. The use of 'needfire' to protect livestock from disease is well-attested in later sources from the Scottish borders, including specific details of the practice of kindling special bonfires through which livestock might be driven.⁹⁰ Although the use of needfire is not singled out in our period, we know that employment of charms and spells for similar ends was condemned by many church councils. The Council

⁸⁶ For the case of the Christian population around Melrose which returned to pagan rites when they were afflicted by an outbreak of plague see Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, in *Two Lives of St Cuthbert: a Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 141–307 at p. 184. See also the general discussion of such 'reversions' in G. Tellenbach, *The Church in Western Society from the Tenth to the Early Twelfth Century*, trans. T. Reuter (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 7–8.

⁸⁷ Settlements bearing this name are to be found in Cumberland and Northumberland and there is also the village of Fenton Barns in East Lothian.

⁸⁸ Priapus was a classical fertility god who ensured the fecundity of women, gardens and fields and appeared in faun-like guises. See M. Leach (ed.), *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (London, 1972), p. 886.

⁸⁹ For the Lanercost chronicler's hostility to monks see Gransden, *Historical Writing c.550–c.1307*, pp. 497–8; and for examples *Lanercost Chronicle*, pp. 103–4.

⁹⁰ Ronald Hutton has traced such rituals from the later middle ages into the early modern period and even into the modern era in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Welsh Marches. See Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, pp. 312–15; also E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1903), p. 125; Wilson, *Magical Universe*, p. 36. On apotropaic uses of fire see J. P. Roux, 'Fonctions chamaniques et valeurs du feu chez les peuples altaïques', *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 189 (1976), 67–101.

of Westminster in 1102 rejected the use of animal bones as a charm against cattle plagues (as part of a longer list prohibiting sorcery, divination and other 'works of the devil').⁹¹ Similar tactics were condemned in a variant manuscript of the twelfth-century penitential of Bartholomew Iscanus, bishop of Exeter (1161–86). It warned against the making of 'knots or sorceries or diverse enchantments by charms and witchcraft' which were hidden in trees, or grass or branching roads 'in order to free beasts from murrain'.⁹² Although the specifics might be lost here, we can still see the outlines of tensions which were at work. We know that the church made freely available an assortment of remedies in moments of communal crisis. Sick cattle might be asperged with holy water or the intervention of saints might be solicited through collective rituals designed to drive away disease. But, urged by desperate need, perhaps most tellingly in those moments when cross, holy water and relic procession failed to deliver, there were also unofficial strategies available in local culture which jostled these clerical measures. These may not have amounted to the full-blooded pagan revivals that Bede had talked about but they were, especially among churchmen who knew their *Ecclesiastical History*, susceptible to criticism in exactly the same way as magical, devilish and pagan.

So we need to be careful here. *Non-Christian* apotropaic measures of these kinds do not add up to the survival of pagan cult even when they are energetically denounced as *unchristian*. If we want to attach labels, then 'magical' might be less dangerous than 'pagan'. For magic, as Valerie Flint has indicated and Alexander Murray has argued, could, and did, have an afterlife even when pagan cult was dead.⁹³ And, as Murray has also warned, the frequent conflation of paganism and magic in many early medieval church texts was not a simple consequence of social realities. The two were in practice separable. It was the work of churchmen who were eager to tar all *non-Christian* ritual practices with the same brush that treated them together, because cult and magic alike were the works of the devil. Both contested, in different ways, the claims of Christianity. The former was most spectacularly dangerous because it offered up alternative cosmologies and rival objects of veneration. But the latter was only slightly less worrying because it was thought to constitute a

⁹¹ 'Council of Westminster (1102)', in *Councils and Synods I*, ii, p. 614. Although the injunctions were not original the selection of these canons in particular is more likely than not to reflect episcopal perceptions of local practice given that such councils were convened to deal with pressing matters of observance.

⁹² *Reliquae Antiquae*, p. 285.

⁹³ Flint, *Magic*, *passim*; Murray, 'Missionaries and Magic', pp. 92–104.

reservoir of rival means of protection and cure in a world in which the promise of wonder-working was prominent in local Christianity.⁹⁴

This sort of equation between magic and pagan cult also seems to have been made by our friar in the locality and is suggested by his strikingly odd claim that Priapus, Roman god of fields and fertility, was at the heart of the Lothian cult. This suggests that book-learning about paganism (furnished perhaps by Augustine whose writings could have supplied the raw materials) informed his view of events in the borders as a local resurrection of an ancient body of pagan ritual.⁹⁵ For him 'paganism' was monolithic, unvarying over space, unchanging through time and animated by the devil.⁹⁶ This perspective encouraged the systematising, moralising chronicler to turn heterodox practice into full-blown pagan cult. With his penchant for moralising stories, hard-edged credal evangelicalism and desire for reform of lay religion, this friar had especially strong reasons to become strident.

The same interpretation in terms of classical paganism appears in a second graphic story of heathenism recorded in the Lanercost Chronicle under the year 1282. Again, this is represented not so much as survival but as revival of ancient rituals and not by the contrivance of the laity but rather through a deranged priest whose spirit had been over-mastered by the devil. During Easter week, it was alleged, this man prepared 'the profane rites of Priapus, collecting young girls from the villages and compelling them to dance in circles to [the honour] of Father Liber'.⁹⁷ The chronicler added that 'out of sheer wantonness, carrying in front of them on a pole a representation of the human members of reproduction, and singing and dancing himself like a mime, he viewed them all and stirred them to lust by obscene language'. Other strange practices followed. When the parishioners gathered in the church during 'penance week', as was the usual custom, he had some of the parishioners prick with goads others who were stripped for penitential exercises.

Perhaps what is most interesting here is that the chronicler actually paints a picture of urban parishioners strikingly invulnerable to efforts to 'revive' pagan practices. Where the rural folk of Lothian were remote from the teaching church, the townspeople of Inverkeithing were closer

⁹⁴ On magic see R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 8–17.

⁹⁵ For Augustine's discussions of Priapus see Augustine, *City of God*, II, pp. 322, 344, 464.

⁹⁶ See Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, esp. pp. 63–86 for stereotyped charges laid against heretics and others.

⁹⁷ On Inverkeithing church see W. Stephen, *A History of Inverkeithing and Rosyth*, 2 vols. (Aberdeen, 1921), II, pp. 243–4. There was a Franciscan house at Inverkeithing in the fourteenth century but evidence for an earlier foundation (a charter of 1268) is now thought spurious. For Liber, classical god of the vine who came to be identified in antiquity with Bacchus, see Leach (ed.), *Funk and Wagnall*, pp. 101, 618.

to metropolitan centres and had a number of religious houses within easy reach. So, unlike their country peers, they were depicted not as willing dupes of their priest but as an outraged flock keen to put a stop to the rituals. We hear about those in the town 'who held respectable matrimony in honour' and were scandalised by the suggestive dances. And we find the burgesses resenting 'the indignity inflicted on them' during the bizarre penitential rites the priest had invented. Indeed, it was community self-help, wrapped up ever so thinly by the friar as divine vengeance, which put an end to the ritual oddities. Some of the burgesses attacked the priest and 'in that same cemetery of the church where he began the dance, he fell the same night, pierced by a knife, God thus awarding him what he merited for his wickedness'.⁹⁸ Whatever was going on at Inverkeithing in the year 1282, the gloss suggests a chronicler struggling to make sense of a weird aberration rather than a member of the order whose task was to preach often against such practices. The story's most important revelations are in the author's assumptions about urban religion. Here we catch something of that distinction which our initial consideration of rural/urban religious difference suggested: that remote uplands, where pastoral resources were more restricted, rather than urban heartlands, were the places where these sorts of error were thought most plausibly to emerge and take hold.

So quarrels about the boundaries of orthopraxis could encourage churchmen to bandy about allegations of pagan and heathen practice to give added weight to the denunciation of unacceptable ritual. We can see this in a third story which reaches us from *Libellus Cuthberti* written by the Benedictine Reginald of Durham. This was composed on behalf of the Durham community in the second half of the twelfth century.⁹⁹ The text makes clear through incidental references that, although for the monks Cuthbert's cult had its heart in Durham, there were numerous secondary centres spread over the north of Britain where the saint was venerated by local worshipping communities. It was the ritual at one of these secondary sites, Kirkcudbright in Galloway, which caught Reginald's eye.¹⁰⁰ In this account, we witness the ire of a Durham partisan, keen to exercise control over the cult. His story also contains a sharper sense of something which is

⁹⁸ *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 109.

⁹⁹ On Reginald see V. Tudor, 'Reginald of Durham and Godric of Finchale: Learning and Religion on a Personal Level', in K. Robbins (ed.), *Religion and Humanism: Papers Read at the Eighteenth Summer Meeting and Nineteenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 37–48.

¹⁰⁰ Other 'secondary' centres are mentioned by Reginald at Norham (where a table at which the saint had eaten was used for the swearing of oaths) and at Lixtune where the saint appeared in a vision and began to work miracles. See Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, pp. 108–9, 138–51.

also detectable in the Lanercost narratives: a hint of distaste for the 'barbarous' culture of the Scots.¹⁰¹ Reginald noted events, witnessed by Ailred of Rievaulx and a group of Cistercian monks, 'concerning a certain thoughtless priest of the Picts who on St Cuthbert's day broke the peace of the cemetery, and, introducing a bull, sported with it' and recorded the terrible vengeance which ensued.¹⁰² He described how in 1164 'a certain very fierce bull was offered in alms of oblation to the Blessed Cuthbert in the said church' at Kirkcudbright in Galloway.¹⁰³ The bull was led in by men with ropes as the watching crowds danced around it. Ailred and his colleagues warned against the profane practice, but the rite, in which the bull was seemingly baited by the crowds, was led by another priest. Then 'the bull at length, after all the whirling dancing, bellowed, and bursting into the packed crowds, and so, hurting no-one else, only attacked the aforesaid priest and savagely pierced the middle of his arms with its horns'.¹⁰⁴ Reginald noted that all who were present then appreciated the power of Cuthbert and worshipped the saint more reverently.

At the centre of this narrative is a collision between two different conceptions of what Christianity should be. Ailred of Rievaulx, who stood for a closely regulated religious life structured by a rule, would have been especially likely to take offence at such radical devotions. They had been elaborated by lax secular clergy, the majority of whose houses had suffered reformation in England in the earlier twelfth century. And Ailred had travelled into Galloway with the express purpose of rooting this sort of thing out. He was busily proselytising for Cistercian asceticism, his biographer Walter Daniel recounting how he had gone into the borders because 'some of the men of those parts have turned into monks of a sort' but 'scarce any have the assiduity to reach perfection themselves'.¹⁰⁵ Rievaulx had even 'made a plantation [of Dundrennan] in this savagery' in a bid to transform the religious landscape. Here then was Ailred in the act of confronting that supposed 'savagery'.

Reginald, though a Benedictine, could subsume inter-order rivalries in the common monastic interest of denouncing loose-living clerks, especially those who were barbarous Scots. But he was also folding a second agenda into the first. The story of the bull-sacrifice functioned as a salutary

¹⁰¹ On hostility to the Scots in the Lanercost Chronicle see Gransden, *Historical Writing c.550-c.1307*, pp. 500–1.

¹⁰² Reginald of Durham, *Reginaldi Monachi Dunelmensis Libellus de Admirandis Beati Cuthberti*, ed. J. Raine, Surtees Soc. (1835), p. 179.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Walter Daniel, *The Life of Ailred of Rievaulx*, ed. and trans. M. Powicke, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1950), pp. 45–6.

vengeance miracle which illustrated what happened to those who venerated Cuthbert inappropriately. Reginald was telling the monks of Durham the kind of story that they wanted to hear, a story which implicitly endorsed *their* account of right ritual and explicitly agitated for effective control of *their* cult. Secondary centres might lie beyond the immediate influence of the Durham community, but narratives like that of the *Libellus* advertised the ways in which the saint himself flexed his muscles when improper rites (measured in Durham's terms) were celebrated in his memory and in hope of his aid.

In examining these practices, it is important, even as we take care over Reginald's critical rhetoric, not to get caught in other ways within its frame of reference. In particular, when analysing his account, we must not be tempted to separate out the 'pagan' fragments in the ritual but rather appreciate the rites at Kirkcudbright as a species of vernacular Christian cult.¹⁰⁶ The greatest point of tension visible here is not between 'pagan' and 'Christian' elements of practice but between 'local' and 'universal' conceptions of cult, between a particular community's making of ritual and the church hierarchy's ever more insistent claim to define and prescribe the rites proper to saints (and for that matter seasons and sacraments as well). This tension between the local and the universal finds expression in the split between the local clergy who directed the sacrifice and the Cistercians who abhorred it.

In each of the three narratives we have considered, English churchmen writing from within religious orders and having particular axes to grind produced stories which mobilised the language of paganism as a cultural tool. Chroniclers offered systematising accounts of unacceptable local religious practice which drew on book-learning about ancient paganism to supply politically useful interpretative frameworks for events. In telling stories in this way, the claims of particular religious communities and of the universal church more generally could be asserted and strengthened

¹⁰⁶ The Kirkcudbright case is not unique: there were later instances of bulls being sacrificed in honour of saints, including regular annual offerings to St Benyo at Clynnog Fawr, Dyfed, which were suppressed in 1589 (though they may have survived at Clynnog, Carmarthenshire down to the nineteenth century). There were also reports of 'abominable and heathenish practices' during devotions to St Maelrubha (on the saint's day: 25th August) in Wester Ross in 1678. On these cases see Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, pp. 329–30; Wilson, *Magical Universe*, p. 92; R. and F. Morris, *Scottish Healing Wells* (Sandy, 1987), p. 190. Bury St Edmunds preserved a tradition of 'white bull' processions into the fifteenth century which it has been suggested might have been associated with fertility rites. See M. M. Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Religious Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1989), pp. 44–6. On the archaeology of medieval animal sacrifice (including discussion of the problems of interpreting often profoundly ambiguous evidence) see R. Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London, 1987), pp. 117–18, 185–6.

against those of local cults. And yet these narratives are also interesting because they suggest the limitations of paganism as an explanatory and rhetorical instrument. Churchmen did not reach for it as their weapon of choice. The Scottish Cistercians were, for a Franciscan author and a Franciscan audience, appealing Aunt Sallies at which allegations about heathenism might be shied. For Reginald, there was a subtext of acute religious laxity, this time sustained by poorly regulated communities of secular clerks. Paganism was, in other words a dangerous rarity in need of careful explanation. It was the occasional stuff of wild upland, alien places, areas which our clerical authors saw as on the edges of the ordered and organised ecclesiastical world. Or else, as in the story from Inverkeithing, it was the direct inspiration of the devil at work in the heartlands of the faith and possessing the mind of a single man but failing to infect a steadfast wider community.

Tendencies in normative writing seem to bear this contention out. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the primary concern of clerical legislators became closer control of Christian cult rather than the extirpation of pagan practice. Councils such as that convened by Anselm at Westminster in 1102 sought to prevent unauthorised veneration of the dead and the Fourth Lateran Council subsequently triggered further action to curtail unofficial saint-making and reverencing of relics.¹⁰⁷ Even more striking is widespread concern about the misappropriation and 'superstitious' use of liturgical objects and substances. As the sacraments were subject to increasingly sharp definition and enhanced status in the central middle ages they too attracted growing attention from penitential writers and synodal legislators who feared that they might be misinterpreted or open to abuse. Any understandings of the sacraments which were judged erroneous or 'superstitious' were energetically condemned. Thus the conviction, prevalent in some dioceses, that it was unlucky to baptise children on Easter Eve or Whit Sunday was singled out for denunciation.¹⁰⁸ So too was the notion that extreme unction might hasten death once received or that it left those who subsequently recovered trapped in a liminal condition caught between death and life.¹⁰⁹ Liturgical objects and materials were also to be defended against 'magical' misuse. Hence fonts were to be kept closed, and consecrated wafers, oil and chrism maintained under lock and key. Even baptismal bandages

¹⁰⁷ See Webb, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 32–3; Kemp, *Canonization*, pp. 53–4.

¹⁰⁸ Moorman, *Church Life*, p. 84; 'Statutes of Worcester III' (1240), in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 297.

¹⁰⁹ Moorman, *Church Life*, p. 88; 'Statutes of Salisbury I', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 90. Some people recovered after receiving extreme unction then (in error) abstained from meat and sex and would go barefoot, 'Statutes of Worcester III', *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 305.

were to be destroyed lest traces of chrism preserved on them be used to work magic.¹¹⁰ Such fears about ‘magical’ uses of sacramental objects and substances suggest, paradoxically, how far Christian conceptions of the supernatural had come to saturate thought in the localities.¹¹¹ Indeed, it is very striking that when Bishop Walter Cantilupe acted in 1240 against the veneration of springs at North Cerney near Gloucester, he revealed the broader Christian context of these practices by threatening deprivation of the sacraments for all those involved.¹¹² By the early thirteenth century, it is abundantly clear that senior churchmen were fighting new battles.

DIVERSITIES OF DEVOTION

The examples we have just explored reveal tensions in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christianity, moments when local and universal readings of the sacred came into conflict. But it would be a mistake to over-privilege them for there is also much to indicate the consensual nature of religion in the central middle ages. By late medieval standards, religious activity in the localities was relatively lightly supervised. In consequence, it is likely that diocesan hierarchies chose their battles over belief and practice with care, striving to preserve the integrity of fundamental elements of the faith. Thus the sacraments might be defended against abuse but beyond such essential rituals greater latitude might be allowed.

Indeed, parochial devotions in the twelfth century remained a world of saints and shrines, many of which had only a very local significance. John Blair has drawn attention to this, stressing the importance of cults which were tied to particular holy places, often coming to be associated with minsters, and which left behind only the most fragmentary evidence of their existence.¹¹³ William of Malmesbury points us in the same direction. He noted that there was little written evidence to verify the credentials of St Rumnonus of Tavistock and added that ‘you will find the same thing in many other places in England . . . just a bare list of names of saints and a record of any miracles they have accomplished’.¹¹⁴ Such shrines, and others from which not a shred of written testimony has survived, frequently formed devotional centres for their

¹¹⁰ See below p. 132; C. G. Homans, *English Villagers in the Thirteenth Century* (New York, 1941), p. 383.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

¹¹² ‘Statutes of Worcester III’, in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 303; also see discussion in Webb, *Pilgrimage*, p. 141.

¹¹³ J. Blair, ‘A Saint for Every Minster’, in R. Sharpe and A. Thacker (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 455–91.

¹¹⁴ WM, GP, p. 202.

neighbourhoods.¹¹⁵ But, because most local cults did not generate the eye-catching crises described with such relish by Reginald and Richard of Durham, ecclesiastical writers tended to pass over these silently and we only catch glimpses of them through incidental references. William of Malmesbury chances to mention in his *Gesta Pontificum* a major secondary centre dedicated to St Aldhelm in Dorset, where, though there were no relics of the saint, 'the quantity of miracles brought people each year to his feast day there, and the gifts that were offered and the miracles that were displayed were more numerous than those in the place where his most sacred bones were kept in reverence'.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Orderic Vitalis makes a brief reference to the cult of St Judoc at Parnes because the church had been given by Foucher of Chaudry to Orderic's own monastery of St Evroul. We learn that 'on certain festivals the parishioners from the seven neighbouring hamlets duly assembled to make offerings to God and hear his solemn word and praise' (a relic of Judoc had been acquired by the parish and 'carefully placed by the priest and parishioners in the church of St Martin where it has been revered for over seventy years').¹¹⁷ Reginald of Durham meanwhile told of how men, women and children from the vicinity of Finchale were accustomed to gather at the chapel of St John the Baptist on the feast day of the saint.¹¹⁸ These brief mentions seem to tell us something about the ordinary, unspectacular rhythms of a few among many local shrines.

It is clear that during the twelfth century senior churchmen were becoming keener to supervise this rich and varied devotional life of the localities. Their keenness was reflected in the production of instruction manuals for the improvement of the local clergy. These, we might expect, would be rich sources for the relationship between diocesan authorities and parish communities. Yet this is a dangerous assumption. Two issues emerge here. The first is a familiar one: the authors of these new works assembled their materials from existing church teachings and frequently stitched together the conciliar pronouncements of the early church, the writings of the Fathers and elements of early medieval canon law. As a result, they also inherited late antique and early medieval lexicons of complaint about 'pagan', 'superstitious' and 'magical' belief and practice. But, of course, the paganism, superstition and magic to which those early authorities referred were no longer present in the religious culture of the twelfth century. These complaints, and this language, survived simply

¹¹⁵ Webb, *Pilgrimage*, p. 31.

¹¹⁶ WM, GP, p. 364. ¹¹⁷ OV, II, pp. 152-3; 166-7.

¹¹⁸ Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, p. 372.

because they provided a means to attack the improper beliefs and practices of the present using especially authoritative utterances drawn from the past.

The second problem of interpreting this material is related to the first but is in essence new. Put simply, it is that normative texts were read, interpreted and used in different ways by different churchmen. A churchman's perspective, and his implementation of a manual's provisions, might alter according to his position in the hierarchy, his ties to the parishes and his own cultural affinities. This led, in turn, to different interpretations of official teaching and different tolerances of unofficial religious practice. This 'slippage' is usually invisible to the historian's eye but it is still possible to detect on occasion. A case study of some unusually rich evidence will help to reveal it.

The complexities we have just described are thrown into sharp relief by efforts of churchmen to mark out more firmly sacred space and sacred time and specifically to stamp out irreverent behaviour such as singing and dancing in church precincts. As writers of the new wave of penitential handbooks in the late twelfth century stripped out many explicit injunctions about heathenism they retained a range of condemnations of secularity, profanity and lewdness of this kind. For example Bartholomew Iscanus preserved a decree originally promulgated at the council of Carthage against 'unseemly singing' around churches and in church porches.¹¹⁹ Robert of Flamborough shared with Bartholomew another prohibition (this time appropriated from the council of Rheims) against those who engaged in cross-dressing and proceeded to carouse in churchyards on feast days.¹²⁰ The proliferating synodal legislation of the thirteenth century warmed to similar themes, in a fresh and aggressive effort to delineate sacred space. Statutes attacked 'clamour and vain talking' in churches and also tried to ensure that churchyards were properly fenced in and games, drinking, singing and general revelry kept out.¹²¹ On occasion, the playing of games around the church on feast days and on the vigils of the saints was singled out for particular opprobrium.¹²² Robert Grosseteste, legislating in 1235×6 for the archdeacons of Lincoln diocese, fleshed out such complaints, instructing his diocesan officers to put a stop to the buying and selling of goods in churchyards, drunken revelry,

¹¹⁹ Morey, *Bartholomew Iscanus*, p. 256.

¹²⁰ Robert of Flamborough, *Liber Poenitentialis*, p. 264.

¹²¹ See for example: 'Statutes of Canterbury I', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, pp. 31, 35–6; 'Statutes of Salisbury I', in *ibid.*, p. 93; 'Statutes of Winchester I', in *ibid.*, pp. 128, 134, 'Statutes of Lincoln I', in *ibid.*, p. 273; 'Statutes of Worcester III', in *ibid.*, p. 297.

¹²² In the diocese of Worcester games were not allowed near the church 'maxime in sanctorum uigiliis et festis ecclesiarum', 'Statutes of Worcester III', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 297.

including 'scotales', games and festivals, including 'ram-raising', and indecorous behaviour, on the vigils of the saints and at funerals.¹²³

Grosseteste took an especially austere view and, drawing on the words of Augustine of Hippo and Isidore of Seville, likened such practices to sacrificing to devils.¹²⁴ Turning to dancing, he suggested that such behaviour was similarly pagan and pointed to the hostile words of Isidore on classical pagan revelry by way of proof.¹²⁵ Grosseteste, like the church Fathers, tended to collapse simple profanity and more complex heathenism into a single category of diabolically engineered impiety. This sort of 'normative' position also found expression in some more explicitly didactic stories of the chronicles. For example, William of Malmesbury recounted in a famous tale of revellers in the graveyard of the church of St Magnus in Saxony how a group of dancers refused to halt their festivities and were cursed by the priest to dance for a year and a day. This they duly did, all sinking slowly into the earth as they danced.¹²⁶ In all of this we seem to find a united clerical view. And yet, while these normative writings and didactic vignettes might be a valuable guide to the religious aspirations of certain groups of churchmen, they are not a secure guide to broader thinking within the clergy. Hints in the synodal legislation itself suggest as much. 'Scotales', for example, were a problem which exercised Bishop William Briwere of Exeter (d. 1244) but it seems that the lesser clergy of the diocese were actively engaged in orchestrating these

¹²³ 'Mandates of Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, to his Archdeacons (1235 × 6)', 'Statutes of Lincoln 1', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, pp. 202–5. Robert Grosseteste's condemnations of illicit practices in the diocese of Lincoln were comprehensive and inflexible ranging over miracle plays, drinking bouts (scotales), 'ram-raising', village games, *festum stultorum* and *Inductio Maii siue Autumni*. For these see Chambers, *Medieval Stage*, i, p. 91; 'Statutes of Lincoln 1', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, pp. 273–4. Walter Cantilupe made similar prohibitions for the diocese of Worcester, singling out in particular *ludus de rege et regina* and *ludi inhonesti* being performed in churchyards and holy places and anywhere on Sundays, the vigils of saints and saints' days themselves. This legislation does not necessarily indicate a rising tide of profanity in the localities as there had been concerted measures against such practices before. There was much criticism of the use of churches for buying and selling, idle chatter, eating and drinking and game-playing in 'The Northumbrian Priests' Law', in *Councils and Synods I*, i, pp. 456–7; 'Aelfric's Letter to Wulfsgie III', in *ibid.*, pp. 217–18; 'The So-Called "Canons of Edgar"', in *ibid.*, p. 323. This long run of material does reveal the many worldly uses to which hallowed ground was put by villagers less keenly sensitive to sharp boundaries between sacred and profane than many reform-minded bishops. On 'secular' uses of church buildings see Homans, *Villagers*, p. 384.

¹²⁴ Grosseteste also added further condemnations of such practices in 'Statutes of Lincoln 1', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 271.

¹²⁵ Isidore, *Etymologies*, bk 18, c. 27.

¹²⁶ WM, GR, i, pp. 294–7. On other versions of this popular medieval legend see Chambers, *Medieval Stage*, i, pp. 161–2.

events, leading the bishop to make special mention of local priests in his prohibitions of 1225 × 37.¹²⁷

Similarly, bans on dancing in churchyards could be interpreted more flexibly by churchmen on the ground than by bishops presiding over synods. Perhaps the best illustration of this is to be found in the voluminous writings of Gerald of Wales. Relating an eyewitness account derived from his tour through Wales, Gerald told of the church and cult of St Eluned, one of the twenty-four daughters of Brychan, sometime ruler of Brecknock.¹²⁸ Eluned's church stood on a hill near the castle of Brecon and the shrine spawned what was in many ways a not unusual local cult.¹²⁹ According to Gerald, on Eluned's feast day (1 August), 'great crowds of the common people' were accustomed to gather on the hill and 'by the merits of the blessed virgin, the sick with various illnesses are accustomed to recover their wished for health'.¹³⁰ But what followed was much more odd:

What is accustomed to happen on the feast day of this virgin seems noteworthy to me. For you may see men and girls, now in the church, now in the churchyard, now in a circle-dance which goes around the churchyard with traditional songs (*cantilena*). Suddenly, they fall to the ground, and then those who, until now, have quietly followed the leader, peacefully as if in a trance, springing up as if seized by a frenzy, mime with their hands and feet whatever work they were accustomed to perform on feast days. You might see one man put his hand to a plough, another as if he were goading oxen with a stick; each of them, as if to mitigate the labour, singing customary songs in a strange voice. You might see this man imitate a cobbler, that man a tanner. Here you might see a girl as if she were holding a distaff, now drawing out thread in her hands, stretching it at arms length and now winding it back onto a spindle. One, as she walks along fits the thread to the warp; another tosses a shuttle from side to side, and with thrusts of the small tool from hand to hand, seems to weave cloth. Eventually, they enter the church. They are led to the altar and there, as they make their offerings, you will be surprised to see them awaken and return to themselves.¹³¹

¹²⁷ 'Bannumque scotallorum per sacerdotem uel clericum in ecclesia fieri prohibemus; quod si sacerdos uel clericus hoc fecerit uel scotallis siue aliis prohibitis potationibus intersit, canonice puniatur', 'Statutes of Exeter 1 (1225 × 37)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 231.

¹²⁸ On Brychan and the legends surrounding him see J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, 2 vols., 3rd edn (London, 1939), i, pp. 270–2 and on the sources of the legends p. 270 n. 237; GW, *IK*, pp. 31–3.

¹²⁹ The site of the chapel is thought to be near Slwch Tump just outside Brecon according to G. E. F. Morgan, 'Forgotten Sanctuaries', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 6th series, 3 (1903), 205–23.

¹³⁰ GW, *IK*, p. 32. The translations here are, with some modifications, from *Gerald of Wales: the Journey through Wales and the Description of Wales*, trans. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 92–3.

¹³¹ GW, *IK*, pp. 32–3.

These rituals, at least as they are described by Gerald, seem to represent a local response to church teaching about sacred time and sin. Members of this community had absorbed the idea that working on feast days was sinful but were still reluctant, perhaps pressured by the demands of an agrarian economy, to follow these prescriptions to the letter. In the absence of readily fulfillable penances (an especial problem given the continuing preponderance of rigorous penitential practices through which one was thought to make 'full satisfaction' for one's sins), local rites had emerged to lighten the lot of post-mortem punishment through ritualised re-enactment and the intercession of the saint.

And yet it is striking that there is so little evidence of tension in Gerald's account. There was, for example, no clash between the local churchmen and their parishioners: the priest stood at the heart of the ritual, dispensing absolution at the altar rail to all those who had participated in it. That priests should stand so close in thought to their flocks is perhaps unsurprising, since Gerald had lamented the secularisation of the Welsh clergy, their propensity to marry and their willingness to tolerate lay proprietorship over churches. Yet Gerald himself also seems to have been untroubled by what he saw, even seeing merit in this unofficial expiatory ritual, since 'God in his mercy does not delight in the death of a sinner, but in his repentance: and so, by taking part in these festivities, many at once see and feel in their hearts the remission of their sins, and are absolved and pardoned.'¹³² This is especially striking given that Gerald was often unsympathetic to a Welsh culture which he frequently portrayed as uncouth, barbarous and alien.¹³³

Gerald's conclusion is not only at odds with the general tenor of normative sources – which were so quick to condemn dancing in or near churchyards – it also runs against the grain of observations made by Gerald himself in his own collection of *exempla*, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*. Gerald presented this work as an instruction manual for the Welsh clergy but he seems to have written it with an eye on Rome, hoping to curry favour at the curia in his battle for the bishopric of St David's. He threaded together the teachings of the Fathers and early church councils and replicated their hard line about dancing in churchyards, asserting that 'the laity ought not to engage in singing and dancing around churches and cemeteries on the feasts of saints but should devote themselves to the

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³³ Gerald's mother could trace her ancestry back to the Welsh princes of Deheubarth. See B.F. Roberts, *Gerald of Wales* (Cardiff, 1982), pp. 11–13; J. Conway-Davies, 'Giraldus Cambrensis 1146–1946', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 99 (1946), 85–108 at 90–1.

divine service'.¹³⁴ Here Gerald worried that dancing and singing of songs might 'interfere with the pious prayers of religious people' and went on to tell a tale about a priest who had been so distracted by the lewd singing of his parishioners that he committed a blunder while celebrating mass.¹³⁵

So in the *Gemma* Gerald was at one with the authors of penitential manuals and the framers of synodal statutes, but in the *Itinerarium* he parted company with them. There is something more substantial here than simply a representational shift generated by genre difference. Senior churchman who wrote handbooks and framed synodalia had the luxury of taking hard-line positions on what was and was not appropriate religious practice in the localities. But those churchmen in the developing parishes, like the priests involved in the Exeter scotales, may have been much more willing to compromise with the varied cultural practices taking place there. As he moved from one genre to another, Gerald moved between these two roles. Where he was the legislating churchman in the *Gemma*, he became something closer to the practising pastor in the *Itinerarium*. And, though he had incorporated the hard words of past authorities verbatim into new normative texts, he softened them as he engaged with religious realities.¹³⁶ For Gerald, the dancers at Eluned's shrine performed an unofficial rite, but they nonetheless 'felt contrition in their hearts' and thus enjoyed remission of their sins.

Gerald's toleration is not unique, though it is uniquely detailed. Willingness to compromise on ritual forms, so long as the content of belief seemed generally secure, is also visible in other instances of dancing on saints' days. Even Reginald of Durham reported without censure how, on St Cuthbert's Day at a church in northern England, the young were accustomed to sing and dance in the cemetery while the old would pray inside the church.¹³⁷ A similar message also seems to emerge from shifting attitudes to scotales. If we take a longer perspective on this practice, we can see that a softer-edged view which inclined towards compromise with local practices ultimately prevailed in many dioceses. Scotales, often rebranded as church-ales, were rehabilitated during the thirteenth century, becoming a useful money-spinner for

¹³⁴ Gerald of Wales, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, eds. J. S. Brewer, J. F. Dimock and G. F. Warner, 8 vols. (RS, 1861–91), II, p. 119. Gerald cited the Council of Toledo as his authority. For those composing legislation in the early church, unlike for Gerald, dancing in or around places of worship seems to have savoured of pagan cult.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–20.

¹³⁶ Robert Bartlett has argued that Gerald viewed the 'Celtic world as united by, among other things, barbarity' in Bartlett, *Gerald*, pp. 3, 10–26, 35.

¹³⁷ Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Cuthberti*, p. 284. Note also that at North Burton in Yorkshire, the young were similarly given to playing games in the graveyard after the commemoration of the saint in the parish church. See *Historians of the Church of York*, I, p. 363.

parish coffers.¹³⁸ Here perhaps a strategy of attempting to mark the sacred off sharply from the profane came easily to many twelfth-century bishops immersed directly or indirectly in monastic habits of thought. But the thirteenth century saw prelates adopt more flexible strategies, drawing in 'secular' games and uses and sprinkling holy water over them. Gerald's response to the cultic observances surrounding St Eluned's day would seem to be of a piece with this sort of approach. As canonical theory gave way to pastoral practice he was perfectly willing to engage in cultural compromise.¹³⁹ His willingness here may reveal a discriminating pragmatism. Gerald accepted unofficial rituals where the intentions behind them seemed good because more important matters, such as proscription of clerical marriage and aristocratic control over churches, demanded more urgent attention. Change could not be effected all at once but must, of necessity, proceed by steps.¹⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, even the strongest evidence for residues of rival pagan belief and practice in the central middle ages does not survive close scrutiny. Yet, even when authorial agendas are scraped away, these instances *do* endure as evidence for religious difference *within* medieval Christianity itself. In order to establish the significance of such difference we need to explain the conditions in which it emerged and, more tentatively, to calibrate its likely significance in religious culture. The first point to make here must be that official expectations of local worshipping communities in the twelfth century may have involved relatively limited prescriptions in practice. They seem to have focused on moral prohibitions, sacramental observances and feasts and fasts. A blueprint for local church organisation composed by Gilbert of Limerick (c.1070–1145), underscores the impression because he tended to emphasise what parishioners should do rather than what they should believe. The laity were 'bound to visit the house of God and there humbly to pray and adore the Lord'.¹⁴¹ They were 'to offer the first fruits, gifts and pay their tithes' and were also to 'carefully avoid evil, earnestly search for good and obey their pastors in everything'.¹⁴² Thus religion might

¹³⁸ The process was already under way as early as 1189 when charter evidence refers to *scotales* in a neutral fashion. Similarly, the Council of Lambeth in 1206 spoke not unfavourably of parochial 'communes potationes'. See Chambers, *Medieval Stage*, 1, p. 179 n.9.

¹³⁹ See also for a discussion of extent to which the church was willing to accept heterodoxy in Schmitt, *Guinefort*, pp. 33–5.

¹⁴⁰ See Bartlett, *Gerald*, pp. 3, 10–26, 35.

¹⁴¹ Gilbert of Limerick, *Gille of Limerick*, pp. 152–3 ¹⁴² *Ibid.*

(as Patrick Geary put it, writing about the early middle ages) still have been 'more danced than believed' in the twelfth century.¹⁴³ And, even if we do not go as far as Geary, we can see that ritual action was still fundamental in shaping a religious experience which was for the ordinary faithful more cultic than meditative. This religion, because it turned on rituals and observances encoded in predominantly oral-symbolic cultures, has passed largely unnoted in our sources. We have only occasional comments in chronicles, hagiographies and miracle collections, and visual clues in fragments of church art. So we happen to know, for example, that Rogationtide festivities marked the rhythms of religious life in some regions. There is a passing mention of them in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for the year 1063 which suggests they were part of the ritual fabric rather than an oddity.¹⁴⁴ And, more strikingly, we see them also inscribed on the twelfth-century 'Labours of the Month' font at Burnham Deepdale church in Norfolk, rendered as the defining parochial activity of the month of May.

A second issue is the inevitable distortion our evidence creates. If the ordinary rhythms of parish religion have left few traces, moments of crisis inevitably attracted much more attention from contemporaries. Some historians have perhaps spilt too much ink on these cases but we must not fall into the opposite trap of dismissing them as mere optical illusions magnified by inquisitive or alarmed clerical authors. Clashes might not be the norm but they are sufficient in number to demand explanation. The assumption that we are dealing with tidy binary cultural oppositions will not get us far in finding one. We have already seen that there was no simple fracture line between laity and clergy. The two groups had much in common and, though they might read the symbols and rituals of the faith in different ways, there was enough common ground to make it probable that they occupied points on a single spectrum of belief rather than being confined to separate cultural compartments. As I argued at the outset, religious sentiments too often transcended social solidarities for such categorisations to work. Even distinguishing the enclosed monk from the worldly layman does not help us very much. The self-selecting spiritual elite who withdrew from the world remained objects of veneration and donation for the rest; the walls of cloister and anchor-hold did not give rise to neat cultural segregation and sharp difference because those who continued in the world valued so much those who abandoned it, and

¹⁴³ P. J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 32–3.

¹⁴⁴ *English Historical Documents: volume 1, c. 500–1042*, ed. D. Whitelock (London, 1996), p. 140. The mention is made in the 'D' text for the year 1063. The obligation to perform these rites seems to date from the tenth century. See Blair, *Church*, p. 430.

those who had fled to the cloister were constantly drawn back, by patrons, politics and business, to the world they had notionally left behind.

This brings us to a third point: better ways of accounting for tensions in medieval Christianity are needed. One possibility has already begun to emerge in the preceding discussion: the complex interplay of 'local' and 'universal' cultural influences in the life of the emerging parishes.¹⁴⁵ We have already observed the longstanding importance of locality in generating and sustaining distinctive beliefs and practices in the early and central middle ages. And recently historians, in abandoning sociological explanations of religious difference, have frequently attached more significance to place. W. A. Christian adopted such an approach in modelling religious culture in late medieval and early modern Spain, noting how some features of religious life tended to be 'placebound'.¹⁴⁶ He showed how attachments to particular shrines, images, saints, relics, prognosticatory lotteries and practices of votive offering often varied greatly from one community to another. Yet other practices such as the celebration of the sacraments, the liturgy, the marking of the seasons and conceptions of sacred time transcended place and helped to unite disparate localities within the larger community of the faithful. Thus parishes shared religious frameworks while simultaneously preserving their own distinctive religious identities.

We have already seen similar patterns at work in the more exiguous evidence for twelfth-century religion. But, in thinking about this earlier period, we must be mindful that Christian's model needs modification. In particular we must recognise two important differences between twelfth-century England and fifteenth-century Spain. First, in the central middle ages the 'universal' teachings of the church were still being formalised, as monks and schoolmen fashioned practical theologies of penance and the eucharist, good works and last things which could be spread in the developing parishes. Secondly, the structures which would ultimately help the church to disseminate a more unified body of official teaching in simplified form were either evolving or wholly absent in the twelfth century. Parishes existed in the sense that worshipping communities identified with local churches, were served by local priests and increasingly owed their dues to them. But, as we have seen, the supervisory structures which would connect parish to diocese were still inchoate and the ranks of local clergy, though plentiful, were still being transformed into a means by which church teachings could be

¹⁴⁵ For similar approaches see P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp. 22–8; for an interesting use of such an approach in a medieval context see Moore, 'Literacy and the Making of Heresy', pp. 19–37.

¹⁴⁶ W. A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981).

effectively inculcated in lay flocks. Preaching and catechesis were probably too infrequent to allow effective diffusion of official norms. Perhaps most significantly in this respect, the mendicants, the shock troops of thirteenth-century re-evangelisation, were even at the end of the twelfth century still but a gleam in the eye of radicals within the hierarchy. And they had no straightforward twelfth-century precursors who could take up the banner of teaching where the local priests still fell short.¹⁴⁷

The 'local' might thus be far more powerful than the 'universal' in the emerging parishes of the central middle ages. This might not be a problem for practically minded churchmen accustomed to the idea that official and unofficial were woven into the fabric of local religion. But it might prove less tolerable for those who held uncompromisingly to the authoritative teachings of the universal church. Thus the differences in attitudes of the worldly Gerald and cloistered Ailred to unofficial local practices might be understood at least partly in terms of their own cultural formation and their consequent expectations of what Christian fidelity might mean. But beneath the accepting pragmatism of the secular and the stern discipline of the monk there might also be something more at work. Where Archdeacon Gerald was obliged to work with the things of an imperfect world, Abbot Ailred was perhaps more inclined to see and reject its manifold imperfections. Where the secular church embraced the broken-ness and sprinkled holy water on the worldly needs and hopes of the ordinary faithful, the monastic order turned away and accepted the sufferings of this life in the hope of better things to come. These two different orientations indicate a further and greater tension, internalised within medieval Christianity: between the needs of the body and the needs of the soul, between pieties which were wonder-seeking and those which were soul-saving. Getting at these tensions is no easy task because sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, they were at work in every believer. They help to explain why those who chose to hold on to the world were drawn emotionally to those who rejected it. And they also help to make sense of why sociological models of belief fail. These forces did not divide the church. Rather they split each individual within it as members of the Christian community struggled in this world and readied themselves for the next.

¹⁴⁷ See C. H. Lawrence, 'The English Parish and its Clergy in the Thirteenth Century', in P. Linehan and J. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), pp. 648–70. For a more optimistic view of the thirteenth-century clergy see also J. H. Denton, 'The Competence of the Parish Clergy in Thirteenth-Century England', in C. M. Barron and J. Stratford (eds.), *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of R. B. Dobson: Proceedings of the 1999 Harlaxton Symposium* (Donington, 2002), pp. 273–85.

Chapter 3

PRAYERS, SPELLS AND SAINTS

As we have seen, the conversions witnessed not only a transformation of religious belief but also a 'socialisation' of the new religion as it became enmeshed in political and social practices. Wondrous, miracle-working Christianity waxed large in a system of belief which was, in many ways, profoundly worldly in its orientation. But the price of this Christianisation strategy was to reinforce the ancient tension comprehended within the faith between the needs of the body in this world and the needs of the soul in the next. In consequence, churchmen of a reformist temper worried through the early middle ages that beliefs and practices had been instrumentalised, turned into practical weapons against danger and misfortune. Alcuin gave voice to such fears, claiming that too many of the faithful would rather have holy things dangling round their necks as miraculous tokens against misfortune than carry them in their hearts in hope of salvation.¹ Alcuin's alarm echoes through the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Hugh of Lincoln renewed the case against over-attachment to wondrous things when he attacked the veneration of a eucharistic wafer which had miraculously turned into flesh. He marvelled 'why should we gape at a sensuous image of this divine gift when every day we behold by faith this heavenly sacrifice whole and entire?'² Gerald of Wales made the same essential point. He dramatised the true value of the sacraments by telling how an attempt to exorcise a demon using eucharistic wafers failed because the wafers were 'food for the soul not for the body' (and, as the unresponsive demon helpfully explained, 'my power is over the body, not over the soul').³

¹ On worries about the over-dependence of missionaries on the wonder-working powers of Christian gestures, utterances and objects and the need to secure conversions by preaching the message of the gospels see Wood, *Missionary Life*, p. 268. See also for discussion of Alcuin's comment Blair, *Church*, pp. 175–6.

² AE, II, pp. 92–5. ³ GW, *IK*, 94–5.

Similarly, he recounted how a devil might even be able to swallow the host, taking it into its aerial body, even though it could have no salvific effect.⁴ These observations all indicate the possibilities for clashes between two different discourses about the sacred which Christianity traditionally tried to hold together. We are not dealing here with a localised historical phenomenon but with wonder-seeking and soul-saving threads woven through the fabric of ancient and medieval Christianity. Indeed, anthropological studies of modern Catholicism illuminate how different discourses have continued to exist within shared cultic frameworks. John Eade, in exploring devotion at Lourdes, showed how the Hospitallers who kept the shrine tended to focus on the 'church's sacraments and the redemptive sacrifice of Christ' while pilgrims tended to privilege a transactional ethic in which bodily privations were exchanged for miraculous aid.⁵ Eade showed that both groups shared a deep interest in the miracle discourse of the grotto but they engaged with it in different ways and drew different things from it.

Peaceful co-existence of variety was the rule in this case and in most medieval cults, but latent difference nonetheless created pre-conditions for tension if needy pilgrims and shrine guardians championed different valuations of the sacred. This was less likely to happen at established shrines because here varied meanings could privately be imputed to rituals whose public forms tended to be agreed, shared and hallowed by long use. Crises were more likely where new cults were emerging because different valuations could generate disputes over the authenticity of the saint. The risk of tensions of this kind was heightened in the twelfth century because the church was taking a closer interest in testing claims about sanctity and regulating the business of saint-making. The danger here was that, where spontaneous devotion might be fuelled by stories of wonder-working and supernatural signs, the church might measure the prospective saint by its standards of holiness and virtue and draw very different conclusions, anathematizing the wonder-working which a local community enthusiastically embraced.

We can see this sort of tension at work in William of Newburgh's account of two 'false cults' which grew up around executed criminals. Local clergymen and townsfolk at Northampton and Stamford claimed that men locally put to death were working miracles. Unsurprisingly, the ecclesiastical authorities took strong exception to the claims and battled to suppress them. But propelling this social drama were different appreciations of the divine and incompatible 'tests' for sanctity which

⁴ Gerald of Wales, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, II, pp. 228–31.

⁵ J. Eade, 'Order and Power at Lourdes: Lay Helpers and the Organization of a Pilgrimage Shrine', in J. Eade and M. Sallnow (eds.), *Contesting the Sacred: the Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London, 1991), pp. 51–76.

flowed from them.⁶ The members of the church hierarchy who moved in to quash the cults and those local clergy and laity who promoted them emphasised different elements of the same language of the sacred. Hostile churchmen steeped in hagiographical traditions argued that only from the deepest Christian virtue might spring the grace of true miracles. Signs wrought without any indication of virtue might (as William of Newburgh darkly hinted) easily be the work of evil angels.⁷ The local laity and clergy, on the other hand, prized the miraculous in a world shot through with uncertainty and misfortune. And so they argued the other way: from news of amazing signs and striking miracles they deduced that a guiltless and virtuous man had met a martyr's death on the gallows.

So Hugh of Lincoln, Gerald of Wales and William of Newburgh continued to reflect Alcuin's worries about an instrumental piety which saw the value of holy things in narrow and worldly terms. William of Newburgh's account of the drama around the corpses of dead criminals offers one insight into why many churchmen thought it dangerous for people to want holy things round their necks rather than in their hearts. Such alarm, though very old, may well have become more intense during the twelfth century. It is important to note that Christian wonder-working remained a constant: it was still at the heart of lived religion. While the new monasticism celebrated the ideal of pious suffering in the world, spiritual heroism remained unrealistic for most peasants and knights and, for that matter, most monks. They continued to seek from the church explanation and alleviation of misfortune through ritualised application of the sacred to social needs. But two important things were changing in the central middle ages. First, many churchmen towards the end of the twelfth century were beginning to take a closer interest in regulating the religious lives of the ordinary faithful and hence were scrutinizing wonder-working Christianity in its varied local guises. Secondly, many of these pastorally engaged churchmen, shaped by thinking from the cloister and the schools, were coming to attach greater significance to the intentions lying behind religious actions. Thus Bishop Hugh, Archdeacon Gerald and perhaps also the Augustinian canon, William of Newburgh, thought it important to define ritualised wonder-seeking more carefully in the context of the seeker's faith. Their concerns highlight why practical theologies might be needed which established the possibility of wondrous

⁶ Other versions of these stories appear in RH, iv, pp. 5–6; RD, II, pp. 143–4; Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, I, pp. 532–4; Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, in Matthew Paris, *Cronica Maiora From the Creation to 1259*, ed. H. R. Luard, 7 vols. (RS, 1872–3), I, p. 244. There is a useful discussion of the cult in Webb, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 159–62.

⁷ WN, I, p. 311.

help but guarded against magical and instrumental readings of sacred gestures, utterances and relics.

USING THE SACRED IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY: GESTURES,
UTTERANCES, OBJECTS, SUBSTANCES

Before turning to these practical theologies and the means by which latent tensions were negotiated in medieval Christianity, we need to explore the repertoire of religious gestures, utterances, objects and substances held to possess apotropaic attributes. Here it is possible to trace an array of shared practices through a range of texts and genres across the span of our long twelfth century. At the heart of many of the practices stood the parish priest, a key mediator of supernatural power in the local community. He was obliged to communicate grace by uttering blessings. For instance, Gilbert of Limerick instructed him to bestow benedictions on a great variety of occasions: at weddings on bridegrooms and brides, upon the bread or water used in the judicial ordeal, on veils of widows, first fruits offered in church, candles offered on Candlemas day, ashes at the start of Lent, palms on Palm Sunday and those about to go on pilgrimage. Priests might sanctify things with holy water and here again Gilbert had specific duties in mind, enjoining, for example that the priest sprinkle holy water in new homes.⁸ The other side of the benedictional coin was liturgical cursing. Where blessings might be sought by the laity, anathemas and excommunications might be feared. Gilbert seems to have envisaged the use of these means to protect the church, secure moral observance and in more general defence of social order. Thus the priest was to excommunicate those who fell into crime and to deny communion to the unregenerate sinner.⁹

How such rituals might have been understood by parishioners is near impossible to tell. We know that, by the later middle ages, candles blessed on Candlemas day and palms from Palm Sunday were thought to retain virtues and were used in homes during moments of crisis ranging from thunderstorms to the solemnities of the deathbed.¹⁰ Likewise, we can discern something of the effect of the General Sentence, the 'greater excommunication' pronounced four times yearly against those who offended against holy church, from the many wills of those late-repenting sinners who made urgent amendment for tithes forgot and other misdemeanours.¹¹ The power of these holy things and ritual words may

⁸ *Gille of Limerick*, ed. Fleming, pp. 156–7. ⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* For the later middle ages see Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 14–37. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 356–7.

already have been apparent to the twelfth-century laity but our exiguous sources do not afford us many glimpses of their reactions. Only exceptionally, and indirectly, do we detect glimmers of the parochial response. For example the local significance of benedictions is hinted at by a chance reference in the cartulary of Eye Priory. This noted that in 1205 monks and local priests were engaged in a battle at Dunwich over who should have the right to bless ships in the harbour. This service was seemingly sought after enough to be worth churchmen fighting over it.¹²

We can also try to summon the dry bones of Gilbert's prescriptions to life through narratives in chronicles and miracle collections which represent apotropaic measures in action. Colourful tales of cosmic and social drama, ranging from demonic apparitions to choking fits, often depict priests and laymen and women reaching for holy things or uttering holy words to stave off calamity. Stylised as these portrayals are, they still offer clues about the ritual reflexes of the faithful in moments of need. Often the apotropaic countermeasure is incidental to the story's central point, lending to an otherwise wondrous tale a patina of more immediately believable detail. Symeon of Durham, having recounted a visionary's journeys through the otherworld, explained how flocks of demons in the guise of crows congregated around him when he returned to the body but noted merely in passing how these were put to flight by aspersions of holy water.¹³ Orderic Vitalis similarly told of a woman of Brittany who, troubled by an *incubus* in the guise of her husband, sought the help of her priest. He duly 'touched the woman, calling on the lord's name, sprinkled her with holy water, and taught her what to say if the tempter returned'.¹⁴ When the devil came back the woman knew what to do and 'sprinkled holy water, and the demon instantly vanished'.¹⁵

Roger of Howden offered a story in a similar vein, recounting how a woman had become pregnant outside marriage.¹⁶ Caught in a storm as she fled her village, the woman begged God for shelter and then, her prayers being unanswered, called on the devil instead who duly proffered food and fire and found a sheltered spot where she could give birth to her baby. Two passers-by, hearing of this, enjoined the woman to have faith and hurried to fetch the priest. He swiftly attended and, on finding the devil cradling the child, sprinkled him with holy water in the name of the Trinity, an act which put him to flight.¹⁷ More prosaic things than demons might also be tackled with the aspergillum. We see a priest in

¹² *Eye Priory Cartulary*, ed. V. Brown, 2 vols. (Woodbridge, 1992-4), I, p. 69.

¹³ Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio atque procursu istius hoc est Dunelmensis ecclesie*, ed. and trans. D. Rollas (Oxford, 2000), pp. 212-15.

¹⁴ OV, vi, pp. 185-6. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 186. ¹⁶ RH, II, p. 302. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the vision of Thurkill enthusiastically pouring holy water down the insensible visionary's throat in a bid to shake him from his catatonia. Ultimately it did, a choking Thurkill returning from the otherworld to give an account of what he had seen.

Beyond holy water, many other liturgical gestures, utterances, objects and substances were thought to be valuable in apotropaic strategies. The sign of the cross was constantly invoked as a means to drive away evil and might have broader therapeutic effects, Reginald of Durham even claiming that a cross cut into the skin could banish a headache.¹⁸ Similarly, the chrism was thought potent. St John of York was said to have brought a dead youth back to life by touching him with it.¹⁹ More spectacularly, John of Worcester told a story, which he said was circulating widely in 1138, about the abbot of Prüm who was said to have foiled an evil spirit which had been stealing wine from the abbey cellars. He sealed the bung-holes of the barrels with chrism oil; the following morning the demon was found immovably glued to a cask.²⁰ The idea that the chrism might be a powerful help was also reflected in the efforts of the laity to appropriate it for their own purposes. Numerous sets of synodal statutes from the early thirteenth century prohibited the acquisition of baptismal bandages by laymen and women eager to obtain the traces of oil which these pieces of cloth preserved.²¹

The reading aloud of religious texts or even their physical presence was also thought to guard against misfortune. John of Salisbury described in his *Policraticus* how the gospel of St John was used to cure illnesses.²² He also observed that carrying a text of the Apostle's Creed was thought efficacious in cases of possession and that 'to carry on one's person passages of the gospels, to listen to or to repeat them, has been found effective in many instances' stressing that 'such and similar practices are not merely permissible, they are highly useful'.²³ Reginald of Durham mentioned an architect who kept about his person a silken bag containing the gospels and a monk who carried a copy of St Cuthbert's life with a fragment of his shroud folded within.²⁴ Where the gospel itself was put to protective uses, it was most commonly deployed to drive away demons. The Lanercost Chronicle described how a scholar (of Oxford) was possessed by a devil and was treated by one of his peers who suggested 'let one of us begin the holy gospel according to St John, and I hope it will relieve the sick man'.²⁵ Gerald of Wales also described how a soothsayer who had the gift of seeing demons could drive them away with the gospel

¹⁸ Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, p. 377. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 259. ²⁰ JW, II, pp. 102–5.

²¹ Moorman, *Church Life*, p. 84. ²² JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 66. ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.

²⁴ Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Cuthberti*, pp. 93–8, 111. ²⁵ *Lanercost Chronicle*, pp. 44–5.

of St John. When the man placed the book on his lap, 'they all vanished immediately, flying away like so many birds' (though tellingly they returned in droves if a copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* was opened).²⁶ Holy words might even be inscribed on talismans as a protection. The *Itinerarium Regis Ricardi* recorded how a soldier at a siege in 1190 was struck by an arrow which pierced his armour. The bolt was stopped by an amulet – a sort of medieval precursor of the bullet-stopping cigarette case – on which the name of God was inscribed.²⁷

Consistent with that pattern of locally varied cultic Christianity sketched in chapter 2, there is also reason to think that there was regional variation in such practical apotropaic uses of the holy. Gerald of Wales remarked how, in Wales and Ireland, bells, croziers and other liturgical paraphernalia were held by the 'common people' and the clergy alike to be charged with supernatural power.²⁸ Oaths were sworn on these items in the same way that they were sworn on relics in England in the hope of underwriting earthly agreements with saintly authority. None of this had any surprises to spring on Gerald, but he was still somewhat troubled by the widespread conviction that oaths sworn on bells and croziers were more powerfully binding than those sworn on the gospels. As in his description of the rites at St Eluned's shrine, he felt the need to justify beliefs which he seems to have been reluctant to condemn, arguing that the perceived powers of bells and croziers must be grounded in the divine scheme. Their effectiveness arose, he argued, 'from some hidden (*occultus*) power with which they are implanted by God, and from the vengeance of the particular saint in whose sight they are particularly pleasing'.²⁹

Gerald was clearly a little nervous about his audience's likely reactions to these devotional practices, and appears, in his careful interpretation of them, to be anticipating criticism that the symbolic and apotropaic hierarchy of the Welsh was disordered. As we have seen, 'local' Christianities could differ and here is another illustration of how tensions could develop as a result of such difference. But Gerald also (less consciously) suggests in his explanation of the wonder-working power of bells and croziers a second area of possible tension in thought about the apotropaic uses of holy things. His language is telling. In speaking of hidden powers as *implanted* or *ingrafted* (*insitus*) in bells and croziers he evoked a world in which the sacred was crystallised in special and powerful things. This raises questions about how faith co-operated with this

²⁶ GW, *IK*, p. 58.

²⁷ *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*, in *Chronicles and Memorials of the Reign of Richard I*, vol. 1, ed. W. Stubbs (RS, 1864–5), pp. 99–100.

²⁸ GW, *DK*, p. 203. ²⁹ GW, *IK*, p. 27; cf. GW, *TH*, p. 179.

intrinsic efficacy to bring about wondrous aid. Was faith needed at all? Was it enough to be baptised? Or was special fidelity required of the enactor of the ritual or prospective beneficiary? Gerald does not say. But it was an issue which seems to have exercised many of his peers who wanted to work out the relationship between faith and ritual act in apotropaic strategies and to understand their place in God's providential scheme more clearly.

SPELLS OR PRAYERS?

Widespread attachment to holy words and things as sources of remedy in this world demonstrates the penetration of Christianity into culture. But, as I have suggested, there might be a problem resulting from the terms on which that Christian invasion took place. Holy gestures, utterances, actions and things were made available directly to the laity or were mediated through their priests, but the theological bases on which they brought wondrous help to those in need were still not clearly established. In the twelfth century the church, as it intellectualised its traditions and practices, struggled to define the relationship between faith and action in the context of these apotropaic rituals. John of Salisbury offered the outline of an explanation when he contended that such measures 'work for the good of those who love God'.³⁰ Exorcisms, he thus explained, were established 'to diminish the power of demons and break the tie of intimacy which they have with man' and yet they 'can accomplish nothing in virtue of their own power unless they gain their potency from the direction given by God'.³¹ John's account, crafted in a rather different language from that of Gerald, located apotropaic practices more firmly in the context of the user's faith, and this essential idea was formulated more closely in the thirteenth-century theology of sacramentals. But long after this development, as Bob Scribner noted of sixteenth-century religion, there remained scope for magical and mechanistic readings of holy things and words.³² In the central middle ages we can find many texts in which the relationships between inner dispositions and outward actions had to be negotiated in the absence of clear theological guidance. We can see this if we return for a moment to Roger of Howden's story of the child born out of wedlock. Roger makes careful connections between the efficacy of apotropaic acts and the proper inner feelings of those engaged in them. The pregnant woman was told by the

³⁰ JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 143. ³¹ *Ibid.*

³² R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), pp. 5-8, 39-41.

passers-by to 'have faith' in Christ and the Virgin Mary while they fetched help; the priest himself was 'armed with the Catholic faith'. His sprinkling of holy water and uttering of the Trinitarian formula become outward signs of this inner conviction. And the importance of that inner faith in driving the devil away is itself dramatised by the fate of the bastard child, snatched by the fleeing devil as he lies outside the protective shell constructed by faithful membership of the church. The blunt morals here – about children born outside marriage, the fate of the unbaptised, the peril of invoking the devil – were all clear enough, but were underscored by subtler thinking in which the chronicler stressed the link between faith and action. This calls for further attention.

Why should Roger have been so careful to link the two? Another of his stories offers us clues. In this tale, Roger recounts how the saintly Eustace, abbot of Flay, had pronounced a blessing on a spring near the River Wye during a preaching tour of England.³³ The spring soon earned a reputation for its curative powers, healing the deaf, dumb, blind and infirm. It also helped a woman vexed by demons whom Eustace instructed to go to the spring. On drinking the waters, she vomited up two big black toads which turned into dogs and then into asses. Understandably discomposed by this experience the woman fell into hysteria and chased after the demons. She came back to her senses only after 'a certain man, who had been appointed to take charge of the spring, sprinkled some of the holy water from the said spring between the woman and the monsters'.³⁴ In this tale, Roger was keen to point to God as the author of the miracle, but his writing suggested that the relationship between divine intention and its terrestrial well-springs was an oblique one. He observed how, on being released, the woman praised God 'who had *given* such power to men (*qui talem potestatem dedit hominibus*)'.³⁵ There is nothing here about the faith of the woman nor about that of the shrine-keeper as he splashes around the holy water. The impression is of apotropaic properties residing in things in the world, of powers *devolved* through them by God to man. In Roger's tale, the creator was the ultimate author of the woman's rescue, but, working through his creation, he seems far away from the place and moment of the cure.

The emphasis placed by churchmen on right ritual and outward observance might itself risk fostering a sense that proper manipulation of apotropaic measures was sufficient to ensure their efficacy. The carefully milled didactic tale of the holy man Ketell illustrates how this might happen. Ketell, who had acquired the grace of seeing demons, explained

³³ RH, IV, p. 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

that men could drive them away by uttering the holy name. Thus although petty demons were accustomed to make horses stumble (rejoicing if the rider cursed), 'if the man was only a little disturbed and uttered the name of the Saviour, the devils took flight in sorrow and confusion'.³⁶ In alehouses meanwhile, demons might sit on the shoulders of drinkers but would flee their perches when prayers were said (resuming them when the drinker returned to his beer).³⁷ Here the faith of the user seems to have had little to do with the power of the words. And Ketell himself was known to frustrate demons simply by uttering holy names: his great gift was the ability to see devils rather than any special power over them. The holy weapons he used were in themselves entirely conventional. Thus observing demons entering his master's house one day, he cried out, 'in the name of Christ I forbid you from entering this door and from dawdling in this village, call back your companions and be gone immediately'.³⁸ Sure enough, the demons were 'unable to endure the adjuration of that holy name', fled the building and lamented that 'their machinations were perceived by this man'.³⁹

We see again the intrinsic value of gesture and utterance in another scene from Ketell's life. William of Newburgh described how one night Ketell forgot, before going to sleep, to take his customary precautions against demons. In consequence, they bound his hands and tongue to prevent him from making the sign of the cross or uttering the holy name.⁴⁰ Divine intervention saved Ketell *in extremis*, and a dazzling youth (an angel?) appeared with battleaxe in hand to chase the demons away. But he then warned the holy man to be less negligent in future.⁴¹ So the messages of the story seem to be all about reforming outward behaviour: not swearing, avoiding drink, making sure you say your prayers before going to bed. And this illuminates again the potential tension. In teaching so fervently that a virtuous life should be lived within a shape of strictly observed practices, stories such as this risked encouraging believers to over-privilege action and under-privilege right interior disposition.

This gave rise to attempts to re-balance thinking about apotropaic measures. Chroniclers, compilers of miracle collections and (rather later) *exempla*-authors can all be seen trying to do this. Their efforts mattered for two reasons. First, they needed to counter-act that instrumental piety which Alcuin had worried so much about. But secondly they also needed to explain those occasions when apotropaic measures did not work. A

³⁶ WN, I, p. 153. See also above pp. 59–60. ³⁷ WN, I, p. 152. ³⁸ *Ibid.* ³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 152–3. On use of the sign of cross to dispel demons see J. C. Schmitt, *La Raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990), pp. 321–2.

⁴¹ WN, I, p. 153.

solution to both problems was to tell stories in which such failures were resolved within a providential scheme which revealed something of God's larger purposes. There was also an intimate tie between these twin imperatives in explaining more fully the means of Christian wonder-working because mechanistic understandings of apotropaic measures might more easily provoke frustration, scepticism and mockery than those anchored in a fuller awareness of divine providence.

William of Malmesbury developed this case albeit in its starkest possible formulation. His now famous tale of the witch of Berkeley offered a dramatised penitential theology and illuminated the theory of apotropaic practices. William described how this woman had given over her life to the practice of *maleficium*. But, on receiving a supernatural insight that her end was unexpectedly near, she was seized by a desperate desire to save herself. Hoping that she might escape the fires of hell, she looked to the merits of her children who had both entered the church: 'despairing of myself, I rested my expectations on you; I advance you as my defenders against demons, my safeguard against my very fierce foes'.⁴² But we swiftly learn that such 'substitution' had its limits. The late-repenting witch came to realise that merits acquired by others would be of no help to one so badly stained by sin. Appreciating that her soul was lost, the witch turned, curiously, to the fate of her body. Here she envisaged that the fullness of waiting punishment might be avoided if only her corpse could be kept from the hooks and flames. So she instructed her son and daughter to sew her dead body up in a stag skin, place it in a stone coffin, fasten the lid with lead and iron, and bind the whole with three enormous chains. Then she ordered 'let there be fifty psalms sung for me by night, and as many masses by day, which may relieve the ferocious attacks of my adversaries'.⁴³ Physical impediments and an invisible wall of prayer would thus keep the demons at bay. But, as in the case of her soul, 'vain were pious tears, vows, or entreaties; so great was the woman's guilt, so great the devil's violence' that all of the counter-measures were profitless.⁴⁴ Over three nights, the devil, oblivious to the chanting priests, burst open the doors of the church, severed the chains, shattered the coffin and swept the witch away on his coal black horse, her prematurely resurrected body leaving

⁴² WM, GR, I, pp. 376–7.

⁴³ The use of a stag skin probably possessed no special magical connotations as sewing bodies into animal hides seems not to have been an unusual burial practice. Compare, for example, the detailed account of the death of Earl Geoffrey and the treatment of his corpse in *Walden Book*, p. 37; also William Marshal's experience of the burial of the young King Henry discussed in D. Crouch, *William Marshal: Court, Career and Chivalry in the Angevin Empire, 1147–1219* (London, 1990), p. 49.

⁴⁴ WM, GR, I, pp. 378–9.

screams hanging in the night air. Here William was reminding his audience not only that the good works of monks were insufficient to save another's soul (true repentance animated by something more than fear was needed) but also that gestures, utterances and objects did not work in any predictable way by intrinsic power. And here it matters that a witch whose life was given over to the arts of magic was the protagonist because, contrary to her view, the worldly value of holy things could not be measured in 'magical' terms but must be understood in the context of faith and God's judgement.

This idea, that apotropaic measures, though valuable, might be of uncertain efficacy, was picked up by Thomas of Monmouth as he recorded the miracles of William of Norwich. But here the trope was developed in a different way, to make a point about the superior powers of the saint.⁴⁵ We hear how a pious young woman of Dunwich was visited repeatedly by a spirit in the guise of a knight. He pledged his love and presented her with many gifts but she refused to submit to his advances.⁴⁶ The spirit then upped the tempo of his amorous attacks, returning night and day with further blandishments, eventually leading the girl to tell her parents about her ordeal. They decided that the visitor must be a demon, set watches over their daughter, consulted priests and had masses celebrated, prayers said and alms distributed. Her room was also sprinkled with holy water and a cross was set up before the bed.⁴⁷ Not only did these elaborate measures fail to solve the problem, the intensity of the demon's assaults grew. And so, with the girl close to despair, a ghostly man claiming to be Herbert Losinga, first bishop of Norwich, appeared to her in a vision and explained that she had struggled with an evil enemy and had defeated him nobly.⁴⁸ He said that she could now be freed by travelling to Norwich with her parents and offering three wax tapers at the tomb of St William. When the girl awoke, she and her parents followed these instructions and, having done as she was bidden, and having told her story to the monks at the tomb, she found herself liberated from the devil's attacks.⁴⁹

This story, in its complex account of divine aid denied, runs against the grain of this particular miracle collection taken as a whole. In order to bolster St William's reputation, the idea that a search for wonder might fail, even in dire need and pursued in perfect faith, was rhetorically useful. In an oblique way, it supplied a valuable justification for petitions which the saint himself might have ignored (but without advertising any such instances). It also showed more generally how wonders were enfolded in the larger scheme of God's mysterious purposes and how suffering on

⁴⁵ Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, p. 80. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–3. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 84–5.

earth was balanced by rewards in heaven: if aid was refused, this was for a reason, in this case that the steadfast virgin would win the 'crown of chastity' in the life to come. And, of course, it also demonstrated the special standing of William, through whose agency the girl's release from her torments was finally effected.

More generally, in negotiating the needs of body and soul, in comprehending the wonder-seeking and soul-saving imperatives at work in the religion of the ordinary faithful, the saints played an important role. William of Newburgh offers a story which illustrates this from the vantage point of the chronicler. Again we are shown how apotropaic measures were seen to fail. Again, we see how a body was tormented for the good of a soul. This time the story concerns a nameless vassal of the bishop of Le Mans who, while travelling to the shrine of St James at Compostela, was accosted by a monstrous demon.⁵⁰ The pilgrim tried to protect himself by conventional means. He made the sign of the cross (putting on 'the armour of Christ') but the demon ignored this and warned him 'you will in no way be able, by this means, to protect yourself from becoming mine; but if you will fall down and worship me, I will make you rich and very famous'.⁵¹ When these threats and temptations failed, the devil made good his promise of violence and cast a black cloak over the man's head – burning his hair, blackening his skin – and then seized him by the arm. At this moment, the pilgrim begged for the help of St James. He duly appeared in dazzling raiment and put the demon to flight.

As we have seen before, the failure of gestures and utterances presumes no necessary lack of faith in the user. Rather the idea of earthly trial and suffering as the prelude to otherworldly reward was here recreated in miniature: a pale ghost of Job tested by the Lord or the holy man tempted in the wilderness. Thus the devil could terrorise with dark threats, tempt with honeyed promises and even blast with fire. But his power was over the body, not the soul. And yet William did not offer up simple suffering piety as the response for the afflicted. Instead he traced a middle way for the pious laity, making plain that faith might be tested but also holding out hope that divine intervention in this world might put bounds on suffering. In finding this middle way, the saints might be especially valuable because, as they emerged from these stories told by both Thomas and William, we can see that they were at once intelligible and yet supernatural; able to minister help in this world while also interceding for the soul in the next.

⁵⁰ WN, II, p. 434. ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 434–5.

History and the supernatural in medieval England

MEDIATING GRACE: THE SAINTS

If we turn to the range of rituals used to invoke the help of the saints, we can discern a similar desire among many teaching churchmen to make these less mechanical and to situate them in a context of deeper faithfulness. Here, however, we are dealing with a religious phenomenon which was still more complicated and multi-layered than that of apotropaic measures we have just met.⁵² We know from a host of miracle collections and a profusion of modern studies based on them that the saints were at the heart of medieval religious culture from conversion to Reformation and offered a vital means by which the needs of body and soul could be met.⁵³ This imaginative power derived from the special characteristics of the saints as mediators of grace. The saints helped to close the gap between man and a distant, unknowable God; a saint's power could almost be touched and could certainly be felt. It congealed thickly and invisibly around shrines; the grace holy bones exuded, Gregory of Tours contended, saturated things they came into contact with in such a way that cloths left hanging in a reliquary overnight would be heavier when they were removed.⁵⁴ The devotional practices used to establish relationships with the holy dead were often similar in form to those that we have previously encountered, but the sources of that aid might be easier for the faithful to grasp.⁵⁵ The saints represented the supernatural in tangible form, crystallised into incorrupt flesh and bones, present on earth in jewel-encrusted reliquaries which symbolised the simultaneous presence of the occupant in heaven. And the saints also left behind on earth, as a by-product of their holiness, residues of that supernatural power. Bartholomew of Farne, who had driven goat-riding demons from the Farne Islands during his life, thus allegedly instructed that his bones be buried there so that he could continue to keep them at bay after his death.⁵⁶

The human personality of the saint also ensured that relationships between saint and pilgrim could be understood and described in human

⁵² On this point see also Yarrow, *Saints*, p. 8.

⁵³ The cult of saints has generated an impressive literature. For general discussion see Ward, *Miracles*; Vauchez, *Sainthood*; Sumption, *Pilgrimage*. On the role saints came to play in early medieval society see Brown, *Cult of Saints*. For the cult of saints in England see Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*; Webb, *Pilgrimage*; Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 10–88; H. Mayr-Harting, 'The Functions of a Twelfth-Century Shrine: the Miracles of St Frideswide', in H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (eds.), *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davies* (London, 1985), pp. 193–206. On shrines see B. Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1998), esp. pp. 92–121.

⁵⁴ See Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, p. 24. On the desire to be close to or in contact with relics see Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, p. 39.

⁵⁵ See Brown, *Cult of Saints*, esp. pp. 86–127.

⁵⁶ *Vita Bartholomaei Farnensis*, in Symeon of Durham, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, pp. 295–325 at pp. 314–19.

terms. The church could use the language of service, affection and love to describe the interaction which took place at the shrine. Wonder-seeking piety could be rescued from magical and mechanistic misreading, and something equally intelligible, but less at odds with official teaching, could be substituted. Thus, as Sharon Farmer has observed, the monastic communities, peasants and townsmen who engaged with St Martin at Tours 'interacted with the shrine just as they did with living persons'.⁵⁷ Similarly, when Bishop Aelfwald of Sherborne went to the shrine of St Cuthbert, he was depicted by William of Malmesbury lifting the lid of the reliquary and talking to the saint 'as to a friend'.⁵⁸ William himself, in writing his *Gesta Pontificum*, also confessed to having no reason for writing at such length about St Aldhelm, the saint of Malmesbury, beyond his 'special affection' for the saint and the 'promise' he had made to Aldhelm at the shrine.⁵⁹ Thus an encounter with the sacred was imagined as a humanised relationship with the holy.

The power of this idea can be seen in those moments when saints aroused pique in their devotees when they failed to return the devotion lavished on them. Even (or perhaps especially) monastic communities were capable of this sort of emotional reaction against their inattentive patrons. We learn from William of Malmesbury for example that, when the reliquary of St Letard was carried aloft in procession in an attempt to end a drought, the saint initially failed to intervene and had to be upbraided by the abbot for his tardiness.⁶⁰ Only after the abbot's cross words did rain start to fall. Such feelings were sufficiently widespread among monastic communities to have generated a special ritual to express and contain them. Patrick Geary has identified several cases of 'humiliation of saints' designed to shake the holy dead from non-interventionist torpors and Robert Bartlett identified the use of such a rite by monks of Burton against a slumbering St Modwenna.⁶¹

So saints offered an appealing way in which the divine could be made intelligible in the world and its workings expressed and managed in a language familiar to all of the faithful. The cults were still, of course, open to varied readings within this framework. At one end of the range, the saint was a pattern for virtuous Christian life, a hero to be emulated, a patron to be embraced through affective piety. At the other, his or her wonder-working might be conceived in terms of more mercenary human interactions. Offerings could be understood as gift exchanges. Transactional ethics and calculations connotative of mercantilist dealing

⁵⁷ S. Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 1–2.

⁵⁸ WM, *GP*, p. 180. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 330. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶¹ See Geary, *Living with the Dead*, pp. 97–123.

might triumph over a language of love. Cults had to hold within themselves varied spiritualities but they could usually do this because they were bound up by enough that was shared, shared ritual observances in particular, to ensure that differences could co-exist.

A survey of the strategies by which saintly aid was solicited underscores this sense that, within a currency of widely agreed devotional practices, there was flexibility. Pilgrims could seek the wondrous aid of the saint through a wide range of devotions. Prayer and meditation before the shrine, pernoctation in front, or even on top, of it and kissing or touching the relics were commonplaces of rituals described in the *miracula*.⁶² Similarly, applications or ingestions of substances in which relics had been infused constantly recur, offering opportunities for remedy without the need to travel to the shrine. St Thomas Becket worked many of his miracles through the 'water of St Thomas', in which the blood of the saint spilled on the altar steps was diluted or relics of the saint had been immersed.⁶³ Similarly holy oil and even dust from tombs were said to have worked wondrous cures.⁶⁴ Alternative strategies involved making offerings to the saint in the hope that compounded devotion and gifts would yield a return. Alms might be offered at the shrine, including money, precious objects or candles. Sometimes pieces of wax were presented to the saint in thanks for miracles performed and were fashioned into a representative shape, often the shape of a healed limb.⁶⁵ On occasions such offerings were made before the miracle was worked and the vowed piece of wax was used to effect a cure, as was the case at the shrine of William of Norwich where two women independently vowed wax to the saint before using it as a compress on painful breasts.⁶⁶

⁶² See William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, p. 130; also the cases of paralytics pernoctating at the tomb of St Cuthbert in Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Cuthberti*, pp. 379, 441–2.

⁶³ On the cures effected by St Thomas Becket through the 'water of St Thomas' see *Becket Materials*, II, pp. xxvi–xxxii. On the earliest of these *ibid.*, pp. 42–3; and an example of a youth driven mad after being struck by lightning but cured by water in which Becker's clothing had been dipped, *ibid.*, I, pp. 404–6.

⁶⁴ Oil from the tomb of St John of York cured a woman of dropsy according to the *Vita S. Willelmi*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, II, pp. 282–3, 284. Holy oil from the tomb of Norwich healed a man who had swallowed vipers by causing him to vomit them up in Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 189–90.

⁶⁵ For example alms were offered at the shrine of St Wulfstan according to William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, p. 119. Offerings of candles were commonplace, as described by Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 157–9; Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Cuthberti*, pp. 376, 418–19. A little less common was the practice of representative shapes of wax being offered to the saint. Some fishermen of Dunwich caught in a storm and saved after invoking St Edmund offered a wax anchor at his tomb according to *Samsonis Abbatis Opus de Miraculis Sancti Edmundi*, in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, ed. T. Arnold, 3 vols., I, p. 367. See also Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, p. 223.

⁶⁶ Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 253–4, 266–7.

In other instances, people made promises to the saint in return for his help. Sailors called on St William of Norwich and, for the price of their devotion, begged him to calm the waves.⁶⁷ Pennies might be 'vowed' to a saint by bending or marking them. Edward I made such a practice an annual event, having pennies bent to secure the health of his hawks and horses.⁶⁸ Sometimes the devotee might use the penny to make the sign of the cross over the person or animal to be cured.⁶⁹ Finally, relics, in the form of bones or clothing or other objects associated with the saints, might be acquired by a devotee. Thus in miracles associated with St Edmund, we find an unnamed Norman crossing a dangerous ford in safety because he was protected by a relic of the saint which he carried about with him.⁷⁰

In this rich repertoire of ritual forms, one practice in particular suggests multivalence. We find in many miracle collections accounts of sick men and women being 'measured', a length of thread being stretched across the length and breadth of their bodies and then wound into trindles which were turned into candles and sent off to the shrine.⁷¹ The practice was accepted without any hint of disapproval by monastic authors, but one can see immediately that this ritual was complex and that there was scope for subtly different understandings of its efficacy. The 'measuring' suggests extra dimensions to the conventional ritual of offering candles, as here devotion to the saint seems to be co-operating with a form of sympathetic magic. Illness or other misfortune might be 'transferred' to the trindle during the measuring and might, albeit under the superintending gaze of a saint, then be consumed in fire as the candle burned.⁷²

The cults of saints were also flexible and open in a further sense. They were shaped heavily by the social needs of the pilgrims who came to the shrines. These contours of the cults emerge from the miracle collections which reveal how both individual and communal necessities were thought capable of being met through ritualised invocations. Saintly bones might be carried over drought-racked earth, placed close to the heat of a fire, even borne into battle, so that these things might catch the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152; for a similar case *ibid.*, pp. 276–8. ⁶⁸ Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ See for example Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Cuthberti*, p. 231. Detailed accounts of the practice can be found in the miracles of St Godric and St Cuthbert, *ibid.*; Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, p. 410. The majority of miracles allegedly worked by Simon de Montfort also involved this simple ritual. See William of Rishanger, *The Chronicle of William of Rishanger of the Barons' War and the Miracles of Simon de Montfort*, ed. J. O. Halliwell, Camden [original series] (1840), pp. 70–109. The practice is also described in the *Lanercost Chronicle*, p. 53.

⁷⁰ *Hermani archidiaconi Liber de Miraculis Sancti Eadmundi*, in *Memorials of St Edmunds Abbey*, 1, p. 74.

⁷¹ See for example: 'Miracles of St Cuthbert', p. 17; William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 125–6, 138, 179; Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, pp. 411, 434–5, 455.

⁷² Merrifield, *Archaeology*, pp. 90–1.

saint's attention and the power flowing through relics might work more powerfully on the object of the devotees' fears. When drought plagued Bury St Edmunds, the bones of St Edmund were borne in procession to end it. Similarly the body of St John of York was thought efficacious in bringing rain to parched lands in the diocese.⁷³ St Modwenna's relics were paraded to quell fires and were also removed from their plinth and placed on the ground to still a violent gale. And, perhaps most famously, William the Conqueror ordered the bones of St Valéry to be brought out in order to raise favourable winds for his invasion fleet in 1066.⁷⁴

'Weather processions', as Bob Scribner labelled them, were a commonplace of miracle collections and surface also in some 'house' histories. But similar solemn ceremonial might be orchestrated in other times of need as well. For example, when plague broke out in Worcester the relics of St Oswald were paraded through the streets in an effort to end it.⁷⁵ Smaller-scale rituals were used in moments of more personal disaster. A woman of Durham saved her house from burning down by tying a hempen rope around it and calling on the power of St Cuthbert.⁷⁶ Livestock might be saved from disease by similar means. The miracles of St Wulfstan record how an ox was healed of a tumour after its owner measured the beast for a candle and dispatched it to the shrine of the saint.⁷⁷ St William of Norwich cured pigs and also healed some of the priory's own oxen of a cattle plague (again after they were measured for candles).⁷⁸ A man from Powick, Worcestershire was able to cure his horse 'through the merits of the saint' by vowing a penny to Wulfstan and making the sign of the cross over the animal's head.⁷⁹

Ritual strategies might be deployed against human as well as natural foes. Saints were invoked to defend monasteries and surrounding

⁷³ *Hermani archidiaconi Liber de Miraculis Sancti Eadmundi*, in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, I, pp. 90–1. On droughts so-ended in Yorkshire see *Vita Sancti Iohannis Episcopi Eboracensis Auctore Folcardo*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, I, pp. 269–71.

⁷⁴ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of St Modwenna*, p. 211; WP, p. 111.

⁷⁵ *Miracula Sancti Oswaldi Archiepiscopi et Confessoris Auctore Eadmero*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, II, p. 57.

⁷⁶ 'Miracles of St Cuthbert', pp. 18–19. In other towns phials of Becket's relic water hurled into a fire or relics brandished on a pole were similarly effective according to *Vita et Passio et Miracula Thomae Auctore Willelmo*, in *Becket Materials*, I, p. 477, II, pp. 186–7.

⁷⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, p. 151.

⁷⁸ Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 152–3; for the case of the oxen, *ibid.*, pp. 153–4.

⁷⁹ William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 152–3. Many other similar examples survive in the collections of miracles ascribed to other saints. See the cure of a sheep by Godric in Reginald of Durham, *Libellus Godrici*, pp. 460–1; cattle plagues cured by St John of York according to *Vita Sancti Iohannis Episcopi Eboracensis Auctore Folcardo*, in *Historians of the Church of York*, I, p. 325; the cow of a poor woman saved from murrain by the intervention of St Thomas Becket described in *Vita et Passio et Miracula Thomae Auctore Willelmo*, in *Becket Materials*, I, pp. 391–2; 393; and a similar miracle worked by Becket for a man in the Limousin, *ibid.*, p. 536.

communities from predatory nobles or to insulate them from broader political instability in times of war. Durham, so often on the wrong end of military incursions ranging from Norman pacification missions to Scottish raids throws up many examples of this in its hagiographical productions. We hear of marauding Scots swallowed by the earth and pitched straight into the fires of hell by the intervention of Cuthbert and, rather more benignly, of Norman punitive columns befuddled by wondrous fogs in which they became hopelessly lost before reaching the city.⁸⁰

These examples are but a few from the masses that could be piled up but they are sufficient to indicate something significant. It is a curious paradox that a twelfth-century religious culture which celebrated new heights of suffering in its ascetic ideals was still so thoroughly anchored in 'this-worldly' concerns. Wondrous interventions were regularly sought through the blessings of priests in the parishes and the miraculous interventions of saints from their shrines. And this was true across medieval society. It was not simply rustic parishioners who seized on the wonder-working power of the sacred. Peasants, priests and monks, artisans and merchants, knights and kings, all sought wondrous help in moments of social and cosmic drama. The many faces of the saints ensured that these diverse clienteles could be served. Within the communion as a whole there was a particular saint for every ill and to whom every believer might relate. Specific saints were able to develop specific local or regional appeals while others might acquire miracle-working specialisms in healing blindness, breaking fevers or raising the dead. Small local cults might possess a powerful resonance for a community, acquiring a patronal status, while others, like those of Becket and Cuthbert, had transcendent appeal. Cults might come to possess very distinctive characters and their pilgrims might have a particular social, geographical or even political profile. And within each cult there was further scope for diversity. Individual understandings could be inscribed on shared devotional practices, as deeply personal bonds became contexts for ritualised exchange of offerings and prayers in return for gracious aid.

This essential diversity of the saints in their varied competences and appeals persisted through and beyond the central middle ages but the

⁸⁰ The theme of vengeance characterises many collections of miracles, especially, in the judgement of Benedicta Ward, in earlier *miracula* where the saintly *patronus* was more frequently depicted intervening to protect his or her community. See Ward, *Miracles*, pp. 60–5, 67–87, 93–4. During the central and later middle ages healing certainly became the dominant feature of *miracula*. See Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, p. 55; P. Brown, 'Society and the Supernatural: a Medieval Change', *Daedalus*, 104 (1975), 133–51; and for a rather different perspective Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*, pp. 34–102.

intimacy of that connection between pilgrim and saint was to some extent broken down during the course of the twelfth century. As the church took a keener interest in regulating the religious lives of the ordinary laity, it began to insinuate itself more fully into that saint–pilgrim relationship. On the grand scale we can see this in the regulation of cult itself by the creation of more elaborate processes for saint-making and the careful testing of new claims about sanctity. But the shift is detectable in efforts to supervise more tightly the devotions which bound the pilgrim to the saint. Thus many bishops began to attach indulgences to pilgrimages made to shrines, weighing out the spiritual value of an otherwise incommensurable act. Similarly, the growing importance of the sacraments in the practical teaching of the church, and especially the increased significance attached by many churchmen to confession, was making its presence felt as a *sine qua non* if saintly aid was to be forthcoming.⁸¹ Here we can see some churchmen wanting to guarantee that devotions took place in a spirit of genuine faithfulness by ensuring that the soul was cleansed from the stain of sin through the sacrament of penance. And so, rather like William of Malmesbury, Thomas of Monmouth and William of Newburgh, the writers of many miracle collections now used this idea to explain why some appeals to saints failed.⁸² As a prelude to petitioning a saint and becoming the happy beneficiary of miracles, the need for the soul to be cleansed through contrition, confession and penance came increasingly to be stressed.⁸³ According to the *Vita Remigii*, St Thomas Becket visited a blind woman and, gallantly deferring to St Remigius, told her to go to Remigius's shrine at Lincoln if she wished her sight to be restored. But then the author added an extra qualification, noting that anyone who went to the shrine 'cleansed by confession and penance' would 'whatever his illness, recover the joy of health'.⁸⁴ Similarly, though sickness might not itself be brought about by sin, insincere cleansing of sins might lead to only temporary respite. William of Canterbury described such a case involving a man who, cured of a skin disease by St Thomas Becket, returned afterwards to his sinful life and so was afflicted

⁸¹ On the developing theology of the sacraments in the twelfth century see M. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1993), II, pp. 516–698. And for a case study of the implications of such rethinking see Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*, pp. 79–80, 87–9.

⁸² Sin, though tied in specific cases to illness, was not generally used as an explanation for sickness in the *miracula* though it might be presented as a bar to saintly intercession. See Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, pp. 72–3; and also Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 78–80 who takes a contrary view.

⁸³ For an early instance of this tendency to stress confession, associated with the canons of Laon, whose school championed its pastoral importance at an especially early date, see Yarrow, *Saints*, p. 90; also his discussion of the cult of St William of Norwich, pp. 153–9.

⁸⁴ Gerald of Wales, *Vita Remigii*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, VII, p. 28. The translation is from Bartlett, 'Hagiography of Angevin England', p. 41.

afresh.⁸⁵ For ordinary laymen and women, the faith needed to secure aid was ceasing to be such an intimate thing enclosed within a relationship between petitioner and saint. Wider obligations were breaking in. Connections forged through prayer and gift-giving were still essential but so too was a life structured by the experience of the sacraments. And donation and supplication was itself defined more closely and was to be informed by penitence as well as outward observances.

CONCLUSION

Wonder-seeking, whether through apotropaic measures or invocation of the saints, was at the heart of medieval Christianity. Such strategies may have had their origins in the liturgy and in affective devotion to the saints but, as we have seen, they were capable of being invested with subtly different meanings by those who turned to them. In chapter 1, we saw that many churchmen, rather than situating the demonic and angelic in a providential framework favoured by theologians, located these beings in more fragmented cosmological orders. And we saw also reflected in their writing the image of ordinary believers who also imagined the invisible world in a similar fragmented way. In moving in this chapter from the realm of thoughts to that of deeds, we can detect related differences. Some of our authors were unwilling, or unable, to trace the power of holy gestures, utterances and objects back to their first causes in the divine scheme. And some believers, seen again in reflection, appear possessed by similar unwillingness or inability. As a result, apotropaic measures (and even some rituals for invoking the saints) might be conceived as something nearer to 'spells' than 'prayers', efficacy lying more in the correct execution of ritual than the faithfulness of its enactor. The danger here for the church was that wonder-seeking piety, conceived in these terms and driven by social need, might ultimately be shallowly rooted. And, although such shallow piety might no longer eventuate in pagan revivals, it might lead the seeker to scepticism, despair or magical alternative remedies. Thus we see chroniclers and hagiographers engaging with stories about frustrated wonder-seeking in order to situate particular failures in God's providential scheme. And we also see in these stories, directly or indirectly, pastorally engaged churchmen who were trying to build up a more complex economy of the sacred. This connected the search for wonder to a deeper faithfulness and, ultimately, tried to encourage the faithful to live their lives in a way which subordinated

⁸⁵ *Becket Materials*, 1, pp. 431–2.

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the needs of the body in this world to those of the soul in the next.⁸⁶ This was a message with general currency. Just as all social groups, from peasants to knights, from priests to monks, made their way to the shrines in need of the wondrous, so all could benefit from approaching the holy in a deeper spirit of faithfulness and penitence.

⁸⁶ The stories told by William of Newburgh, Thomas of Monmouth and Adam of Eynsham drew on elements of the common hagiographical *topos* of the holy man tested by demons. See for example the story of Guthlac in OV, II, pp. 322–8; and that of a pious hermit in Map, p. 146.

Chapter 4

SPECIAL POWERS AND MAGICAL ARTS

We saw in chapter 2 that ‘paganism’ was dead as a social reality and vanishing even as a fear haunting clerical imaginations. But new kinds of alarm agitated many churchmen who wrote historical narratives in the long twelfth century. As pagans disappeared, magicians and necromancers loomed large, perhaps larger than ever, in clerical condemnations. Why might this be? The social realities of magic in the middle ages are notoriously difficult to penetrate but there are reasons external to the practice of the art which magnified official apprehensions. In twelfth-century representations of magic three fears converged. First, magic was frequently thought to involve the dangerous instrumentalisation of Christian rituals, gestures, utterances and substances in the service of worldly ambitions. Necromancers were believed, for example, to use crucifix, holy water, signing with the cross and scriptural texts to help them command devils.¹ Such manipulation stretched to an extreme the idea, already encountered in chapter 3, that holy things worked by intrinsic power, but here this was turned to purposes wholly antithetical to the demands of faith.

Secondly, fear of magic was also stimulated by new intellectual developments. Bodies of knowledge dealing the ‘properties of things’ and astrology might hold a dangerous fascination for those susceptible to their promise of advantage. These arts had the capacity to distract, entangle in vain speculation or divert from religious obligations. They might also lure their practitioners into seeking things they ought not to seek by encouraging them to divine the future, win the affections of a lover through the use of potions or acquire earthly riches through the practice of alchemy. Here the spread of new and mysterious texts from the east, dealing with astrology, mathematics, geometry and the like

¹ On the absorption of Christian words, objects and gestures into ‘magical’ strategies see Murray, ‘Missionaries and Magic’, pp. 96–7.

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alarmed churchmen, especially those who were sensitive to the glamour of these occult arts but uncertain of their secrets.

Concern about dangerous appropriations of Christian practices and the development of these learned traditions also conspired to produce a third effect. They aroused fear within the hierarchy that the church might be menaced by an enemy within, as some priests abused their learning and their role as ministers of the sacraments to practise the dark arts. In stereotypes of the clerical necromancer, and in the image of sacramental powers abused by him for magical ends, we find the counterpoint of that enhanced sacerdotalism which Reform had promoted and alarm at the inevitable limitations of the hierarchy's surveillance of priests in whom it had invested so much.

MAGIC IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

Churchmen who were worried about these things were guided by a long and authoritative tradition of official writings against the dark arts. The church, in theory at least, had a clear view on magic. Patristic texts and early law codes marked out a range of practices – *sortilegia*, *ueneficia*, *maleficium*, *aruspicia*, *nigromantia*, *auguria* – which were all forms of dangerous *magia*. For Augustine this great constellation of magical practices had formed a sub-set of larger pagan belief. Both magical ritual and pagan cult were associated with the cultivation of evil angels, scriptural texts illustrating how these spirits might involve themselves in such practices. Through them, according to one of the classic accounts of how magic might appear to work, the Old Testament magicians of Pharaoh were able to work wonders. As Augustine put it (and William of Newburgh would later recapitulate) ‘the wizards of Pharaoh were allowed to perform some marvels (*mira*) simply so that they might be outdone by even greater wonders (*mirabilia*). For they worked their deeds by the sorceries (*ueneficia*) and magic incantations to which bad angels, that is demons, have devoted themselves.’² Thus magic worked through co-operation between wicked men and demons but only because God permitted it to happen in accordance with his own larger designs.

The other defining Biblical passage holding up the magician for critical inspection was the story of Simon Magus. Just as Augustine's gloss on the story of Pharaoh's magicians resonated with William of Newburgh, so this tale was picked up by Herbert Losinga, bishop of Norwich. He used it in a sermon to distinguish the false wonders of the practitioner of magic

² Augustine, *City of God*, III, pp. 280–5.

arts. He described how St Peter compelled Simon to show him the miracles he could work and the *magus* duly flew through the air. But 'they were no miracles which the unclean spirits with crafty devices and all deceivableness forged' and Simon was soon dashed to death on the rocks.³ Magic gave access to worldly wonder but at the terrible price of consorting with demons.

Twelfth-century normative writings were similarly shaped by authoritative patristic texts and defining scriptural examples. The *glossa ordinaria* inveighed against magic in substantially Augustinian language and, as Edward Peters has shown, anti-magical rhetoric was little altered by the schoolmen of the mid- and later twelfth centuries, so that scholars such as Peter Lombard were content to operate within a patristic frame of reference.⁴ This helps to explain why Hugh of St Victor (d. 1142) uttered a blanket condemnation of all magic, as sinful and perilous to the soul.⁵ Authors of new penitential handbooks created by Alan of Lille, Bartholomew Iscanus, Robert of Flamborough and Thomas of Chobham in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries also continued to take their cue from these authorities. Robert listed hand-me-down injunctions against divination, sorcery (*sortilegia*), use of potions (*ueneficia*) and necromancy (*nigromantia*).⁶ The early thirteenth-century synodal statutes adopted the same categories and similarly warned against divination, *sortilegia*, *ueneficia*, incantations, sacrifice and love magic.⁷

A recurrent concern was that the practices created by the church to communicate grace might themselves be harnessed to perpetrate evil, that the uses of holy words, consecrated objects and sanctified substances might be subverted for magical ends. One fear was especially prominent: that magic might be worked through the sacraments. Across a range of twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts we can find representations of sacramental practices appropriated for worldly purposes. *Exempla* betray

³ Herbert Losinga, *Life, Letters and Sermons*, p. 315.

⁴ E. Peters, *The Magician, the Witch and the Law* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 68–70.

⁵ Peters suggests there was a growing tendency in the penitential handbooks and canon law tracts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to see all magic as dangerous. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–81.

⁶ Robert of Flamborough was also criticised by Peter of Poitiers for giving too much weight to outmoded injunctions.

⁷ 'Statutes of Canterbury 1', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 33; 'Statutes of Salisbury 1', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 73; 'Statutes of Durham for Peculiars (1241 × 49)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 441; 'Statutes of Chichester I (1245 × 52)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, p. 455; 'Statutes of Bishop Alexander Stavensby for the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield (1224 × 37)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, pp. 214, 222, 303; 'Statutes of London II (1245 × 59)', in *Councils and Synods II*, i, pp. 630–2; 'Council of Lambeth (1281)', in *Councils and Synods II*, ii, p. 902; 'Statutes of Exeter II (1287)', in *Councils and Synods II*, ii, p. 1062. More imprecise criticisms of superstitious rites also appeared rather more rarely such as generalised condemnation of idolatry at the 'Council of Lambeth (1281)', in *Councils and Synods II*, ii, p. 902.

a keen alarm about this, Gerald of Wales worrying in his *Gemma Ecclesiastica* that hosts might be stolen for magical ends or that some might even celebrate requiem masses for the living in the hope that they would die.⁸ Running through synodal acta is a similar desire to protect liturgical kit and consecrated substances from misuse in *maleficium* and *sortilegia*.⁹ Some of the post-1215 examples of this was simple reiteration of Lateran IV's urging that holy things be kept under lock and key but there is enough local variation in the injunctions to suggest that this was more than parroting of the official line.¹⁰ Bishop Stavensby warned of the need to guard sacraments from wicked Christians and Jews, who might, for purposes of *ueneficia*, abuse the elements, oil, chrism or font water.¹¹ Statutes for Salisbury diocese commanded that fonts be closed up and the chrism kept under lock and key 'on account of sorcery'.¹² Vessels used in private baptism were to be destroyed after use and the bandages which were bound around the head of an anointed child at baptism were to be burnt after their removal.¹³ Legislation even banned the use of altar cloths as bedspreads (presumably lest they be used in some form of love magic).¹⁴ Equally, the working of magic at rites of passage such as marriages, be it *sortilegia* (perhaps to determine the future of the union) or *maleficium* (to impede it) was expressly forbidden.¹⁵

This close interest in the defence of the sacraments from magical misuse points to the penetration of Christian ideas into culture in such a way that they were thought to offer raw materials even to those who would subvert the moral teachings of the faith. Yet this evidence also points to

⁸ See the warning that hosts were not to be abused for magical purposes in Gerald of Wales, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, II, p. 32. See also discussions in Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 334–42; Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 75–80; Flint, *Magic*, pp. 304–10. Gerald of Wales noted how requiem masses might be said for the living in the hope that they would die by placing wax images under the altar cloth in Gerald of Wales, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, II, p. 137. Such alarm was widespread: see for a story about eucharistic wafers being sprinkled over cabbages as a protection Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, II, pp. 173–4.

⁹ 'Statutes of Salisbury I', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, pp. 68, 88; 'Synodal Statutes for an unknown English diocese (1222 × 252)', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, pp. 146, 150–1; 'Statutes of Coventry (1224 × 37)', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 210; 'Statutes of Durham for Peculiars', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, pp. 441–2, 444; 'Statutes of Chichester I', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, pp. 453, 457; 'Statutes of the Diocese of Ely (1239 × 56)', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 518; 'Statutes of London II', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, pp. 635, 640, 644.

¹⁰ For the provision of Lateran IV that chrism and eucharistic elements be locked away 'so that no audacious hand can reach them to do anything impious or horrible' see *Decrees*, I, pp. 243–4.

¹¹ For example 'Statutes of Coventry', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 208.

¹² 'Statutes of Salisbury I', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 68; also the provisions of Lateran IV in *Decrees*, I, p. 244.

¹³ Moorman, *Church Life*, p. 84. On baptism see Brooke, *Popular Religion*, pp. 106–7.

¹⁴ 'Statutes of Lincoln I', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 269.

¹⁵ For example the working of magic at marriages was condemned in 'Statutes of Salisbury I', in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 88; also Council of Oxford (1222), in *Councils and Synods II*, I, p. 107.

the limitations of official teaching about the sacraments, as they continued to float in a field of meanings broader than that defined in official teaching. The difficulties of disciplining thought must have seemed especially acute in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as this was a moment in which the intentions of ordinary believers were coming to matter ever more to reforming bishops keen on the deeper interiorisation of Christian values. It is against this backdrop that fear about 'sacramental magic' in synodal statute and new-look clerical manual needs to be understood. Hostile anti-magical rhetoric was being mobilised by churchmen fearful of instrumentalising uses of the sacred. And it was also being deployed to restrain the excesses of worldly wonder-seeking which enthusiastically batted onto the exalted claims the church made for blessed waters and discs of bread, seeing in these powerful things new ways of meeting urgent, unconsummated needs and desires.

NATURAL PROPERTIES AND OCCULT VIRTUES

Danger was not only perceived in the subversion of beliefs and rituals at the heart of church teaching. It could also arise from bodies of knowledge outside or on the fringes of the faith. Among these were practical and learned discourses about natural properties and occult virtues. These shared the idea that things in the created order might be tapped for a host of worldly purposes, particularly the healing of diseases. There was no immediate contradiction between this idea and the demands of the Christian faith. Great ecclesiastical authors of late antiquity and the early middle ages, including Augustine of Hippo and Isidore of Seville, engaged positively with the learned tradition, represented most powerfully by Pliny's *Natural History*, of a world filled with 'occult' virtues. In late Anglo-Saxon England Aelfric of Eynsham followed this lead and worked to accommodate natural properties in a Christianised cosmological and moral framework.¹⁶ Accommodation was also the keynote if we turn to many of the practical counterparts of the learned discourse. For example, healing arts functioned in the interstices of late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman monastic culture, their fruits being preserved in leechbooks and medical receipt collections which often mix herbs, ritual preparations and precatory verbal formulae in their curative strategies.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jolly, *Popular Religion*, p. 109.

¹⁷ *Popular Medicine in Thirteenth-Century England: Introduction and Texts*, ed. T. Hunt (Cambridge, 1990).

The essential idea that the world was full of exploitable natural properties and occult virtues went almost uncontested in historical writing, where it was absorbed unconsciously into many stories. William of Malmesbury told how an Aquitanian monk entered the Campus Martius with several companions, including a necromancer, in an attempt to liberate treasure from the caves. We hear how the necromancer emerged with magical dust which turned base metals into gold.¹⁸ This dust was not the only charged substance in the tale because the necromancer's alchemical enchantments could be undone when washed, 'for nothing effected by necromancy can, when put into water, deceive the sight of beholders'.¹⁹ Elsewhere in the stories of the *Gesta Regum* we see water undoing enchantment in the same way.²⁰ A man turned into an ass by witches in Rome was able to regain human form after rolling in water.²¹ Similarly, Walter Map described a beautiful *succubus* who transformed into a dragon on entering a bath.²² For Map, not only water but also salt especially in its consecrated form could undo enchantments, his *De Nugis* including the story of a sumptuous feast conjured up by heretics transfigured into dung once sprinkled with the substance.²³ So worldly things supplied not only the resources for working enchantments but also weapons for undoing them. In sum, knowledge of the 'properties of things' emerges from these stories as morally neutral; the search for magic dust might be dangerous but the use of water to undo enchantment might be salutary. But ideas which were not intrinsically problematic could become so when they began to invade areas deemed the province of faith alone.

Occult virtues and natural properties had long been discussed in practical literature such as leechbooks, herbals and lapidaries, but, during the twelfth century, we see this learning seeping into historical and even hagiographical writing as it became for many authors a weapon in a standard explanatory armoury. A key to this development was the strengthening of 'nature' as an intellectual category in which pragmatic manipulation of properties might be situated. School-trained writers were often inclined to explain things they found in the world in terms of the operation of virtues within substances and objects. Where Augustine had encouraged his readers to gaze on the 'hidden virtues' of things because they illustrated the wondrousness of creation, others had an eye to their

¹⁸ WM, *GR*, I, pp. 290–1. ¹⁹ *Ibid.* ²⁰ *Ibid.* ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 292–3.

²² For a similar story see also Map, pp. 344–9 and GT, pp. 664–9. ²³ Map, pp. 120–3.

practical usefulness or to the demystification of that created order.²⁴ Adelard of Bath was interested in the properties of things because, by unlocking their secrets, the world could be rendered more intelligible. For him, the duty of the learned man was 'to listen to the very limits of human knowledge' and 'only when this utterly breaks down should we refer things to God'.²⁵ This type of thinking stimulated naturalistic explanation of wondrous things. Churchmen differed in their willingness to countenance such modes of interpretation and the practical uses to which they might be put. Gervase of Tilbury tried to remain in contact with Augustine's interpretation of hidden virtues, pointing out that the powers latent in stones were made known through the 'authoritative writing of the Fathers' as well as 'the evidence of daily experience'.²⁶ But Gervase was concerned primarily in this passage with useful and diverting knowledge of natural properties, rather than, as Augustine had been, moralising wonder. He described how demons might be imprisoned in rings and summoned out and closed in again using seals, signs and spells.²⁷ He discussed how stones consecrated with a herb or splashed with an animal's blood might possess enhanced power.²⁸ By engaging with these ideas, Gervase was not describing anything new. But he was providing an intellectualisation, for the benefit of his courtly audience, of intuitions about natural properties already prevalent in twelfth-century culture.

That such discourses did not impact *only* on school-trained seculars is noticeable from their appearance in the writings of churchmen of more traditional stripe. Adam of Eynsham was a Benedictine and yet was open not only to allegorical readings of the natural world but also to speculative inquiry into its workings. He observed in his *Life of St Hugh*, completed soon after 1212, that a certain swan always seemed to know when the bishop was coming to his country seat and prefigured his arrival with special agitation. He concluded that birds might have foreknowledge because their 'aery nature' made them more sensitive than human beings to approaching events. Adam also accepted that the hidden properties of earthly things could have a role to play in driving away evil. Just how far he was prepared to travel down this naturalising explanatory track is revealed by a further story in which Adam examined the special properties of St John's Wort and considered the relationship between its intrinsic virtues and the faith of the person making use of them. Adam described

²⁴ For Augustine marvels, including the hidden virtues of things in nature, supplied particular illustrations of the general wondrousness of creation. He argued that where pagans sought explanations of specific wonders Christians need rely only on the *ratio rerum* which scripture offered for all of creation. See Ward, *Miracles*, p. 8.

²⁵ *Adelard of Bath*, ed. Burnett, pp. 96–9. ²⁶ GT, pp. 610–11. ²⁷ *Ibid.* ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 614–19.

how Bartholomew, bishop of Exeter, had approached the venerable Hugh of Lincoln and told him about a woman who was tormented by the constant visits of a demon. Hugh said rather bleakly that, if she 'had combated her temptation with heartfelt sorrow, confession and bodily austerities', then little else could be done: she must put her trust in Christ and offer earnest prayers to him.²⁹ Eventually the girl was freed from the devil's attacks and Adam was eager to ascribe this to Hugh's powers. But the story he went on to tell corresponded poorly with this gloss and gave him great difficulty.

We learn that one day, after the devil had almost killed his victim, he vanished and a second spirit approached and offered the woman help.³⁰ He showed her a special plant (later identified as St John's Wort) which she was to sprinkle around the house and keep on her person as a protection. When the first spirit reappeared, sure enough, he could not approach her because of the plant, and, despite threats and cajoling, she refused to throw it away and he was obliged to retreat.³¹ The benevolent spirit then returned, but the woman declined his entreaties to cast away the herb (which he said 'everyone found odious'). She argued 'you can come if you wish, and if you can . . . but, as long as I live, never will I cast from me this plant, which is my only defence against my lascivious seducer'.³² The apparently benign spirit then also showed demonic colours, and 'after long and vain prayers, threats and blandishments, and great and protracted lamentations that he had been cheated by the woman, he at last vanished into the empty air'.³³ This account of apotropaic countermeasures is almost an inversion of those given by William of Newburgh and Thomas of Monmouth and discussed in chapter 3.³⁴ The measures prescribed by Hugh seem to have had little bearing on the woman's eventual deliverance, a plant and trickery succeeding where prayer had failed.

All this seems to have alarmed Adam of Eynsham and he struggled at the end of the tale to find an acceptable rationalisation. Initially, he tried to bend the narrative back into a moralising shape, stressing how the woman after her deliverance 'lived a quiet, chaste and God-fearing life, finding faith, piety and good conduct a better defence than any plant'.³⁵ Yet this hardly squared with the contents of the story and so Adam searched out an alternative explanation and appealed to other accounts and wider experiences. He described how the woman, once free, had travelled to Canterbury and prayed there and, removing the plant from her bosom, showed it to a monk. This monk told Adam that he had

²⁹ AE, II, p. 120. ³⁰ *Ibid.* ³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–2. ³² *Ibid.* ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁴ See above, pp. 118–19. ³⁵ AE, II, p. 122.

subsequently encountered a young man and a girl from Essex who were being subjected to the attacks of demons, and that, on recommending the plant to them, they too were able to ward off the onslaughts.³⁶ Adam now pointed out that St John's Wort was held by doctors to be a remedy against poisons and snake-bites.³⁷ He ventured (superimposing Biblical symbolism on practical wisdom) that perhaps it was not 'absurd to suppose that a bodily remedy for snake-bite should by God's mercy have been effective against the assaults of the ancient serpent'.³⁸ And so he felt his way to a new conclusion. He had read about gems and other things which banished nightmares 'for nothing in the world which can hurt by the malice of the treacherous enemy has through the gracious mercy of our Saviour been left without adequate remedy'.³⁹ This case might be similar. He conjectured therefore that proud spirits were humbled when 'petty and trivial objects' frustrated their attacks on the faithful and to this end God had invested nature with stones and herbs filled with special power. This rationalisation demanded much ingenuity from Adam and its convolutions illustrate the potential difficulties of negotiating natural properties into discourses dominated by divine providence. Here the one idea was accommodated within the other but only, it should be noted, by conceding considerable autonomy to a natural world pregnant with wonder-working resources.

That was a position which Adam was ultimately willing to countenance, but other churchmen were much more wary. The most committed critics of attachment to the properties of things are to be found among churchmen who compiled miracle collections. The reasons for this heightened sensitivity were as much 'political' as 'religious': these writers had an even deeper investment in particular forms of Christian wonder-working than Adam. Their texts, the miracle collections, reveal a world where there was urgent need for wondrous aid in the face of pervasive suffering and misfortune. They disclose a class of peripatetic wonder-seekers touring the holy places of England in the hope of miraculous intervention to end their sufferings.⁴⁰ But it is also clear from the *miracula* that need also drove the desperate to experiment with other

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 122–3.

³⁷ Rendered in the text as 'Ypericon', 'herbam perforatam' or 'herbam sancti Ioannis', AE, II, p. 123. The idea that certain plants might protect against the devil also found a place in Hildegard of Bingen's *Physica*, glossed with the notion that the protective and curative powers of herbs came ultimately from God. On this see V. Charon, 'The Knowledge of Herbs', in L. Milis (ed.), *The Pagan Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 109–28 at pp. 124–7; Ward, *Miracles*, p. 11.

³⁸ AE, II, p. 123. ³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See for example the story of the cripple in WM, GP, pp. 414–15. William of Malmesbury also told of a demoniac who was bound up and then carried by his neighbours from one shrine to the next in WM, GP, pp. 417–18.

practices, manipulation of natural properties and occult virtues looming large among the alternatives to saintly power.⁴¹ Ronald Finucane has argued, on the basis of the miracle collections, that at least one tenth of those allegedly aided by a saint had previously tried out some other remedy beforehand, be it treatment by physicians or cures of cunning men and women (a figure which, on taking into account the preoccupations of the *miracula*, one suspects significantly understates the practice).⁴²

Given that polemicists for shrines were disposed to undermine (subtly) the failings of their saintly rivals, it comes as no surprise that they set about physicians and cunning folk with much greater energy. Within their condemnations of remedies relying on the properties of things there was also a clear sliding scale of censure in which doctors, 'cunning' men and women and magical practitioners attracted progressively more venomous criticism. Thus William of Malmesbury signalled the limitations of the physician's art in his *Gesta Pontificum* in the most delicate way. He told of a monk of his house named Gregory who was famed for his healing skills and attracted interest from a certain layman, Ernulf de Hesding, who sought him out in pursuit of a cure.⁴³ A hairline fracture opens within this cloistered community, as William introduces Gregory, only to tell the reader how the renowned monk's efforts to heal Ernulf were to no avail but a drop or two of balsam from St Aldhelm's shrine succeeded where the physician's skilled hands had failed. The author of the *Vita Wulfstani* more combatively attacked physicians as frauds, pointing to their substantial fees and the frequent failures of the remedies they peddled.⁴⁴ Among the many physicians criticised we find Nicholas of Clun, a parish priest in the diocese of Worcester, who was lambasted for suggesting that his herbs and blood-lettings were better remedies for sick members of his parish than a pilgrimage to St Wulfstan's shrine.⁴⁵ If physicians dazzled with fake learning, local cunning folk were trapped by their own superstitious ignorance.⁴⁶ The compiler of St Edmund's miracles at Bury noted how one of William Rufus's knights named Ivo had been blinded after profaning the saint. He first turned to remedies of women dismissed as 'old wives', which failed, and then went to Edmund's shrine where he was reproved by the saint for seeking a cure by such dubious methods.⁴⁷ St Thomas Becket similarly cured a youth called Thomas who had first sought a cure unsuccessfully, using the remedies of an old woman.⁴⁸

⁴¹ For the preparation of remedies see *Popular Medicine*, pp. 44–62.

⁴² Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, p. 59. ⁴³ WM, GP, pp. 437–8.

⁴⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Vita Wulfstani*, pp. 35–6. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 151–2.

⁴⁶ On medical magic see Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 80–5.

⁴⁷ *Samsonis Abbatis Opus de Miraculis Sancti Edmundi*, in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, 1, pp. 145–6.

⁴⁸ *Vita et Passio et Miracula Thomae Auctore Willelmo*, in *Becket Materials*, 1, pp. 188–9.

Yet the danger of trusting these doctors and cunning folk was still limited. Perils lay in their miscalculations and incompetence or in the possibility that patients would place trust in false or fleeting worldly cures and so neglect the needs of their immortal souls.⁴⁹ Such criticism pales beside that used against the practitioners of magical arts which *miracula*-authors felt able to distinguish from 'natural' remedies. William of Canterbury in his account of Becket's miracles described how a monk named Hubert tried to cure his blindness using charms, a strategy which the author thought involved commerce with evil spirits and which succeeded in making the monk's problems worse. It was only when he called on the saint that his sight was restored.⁵⁰ William's hostility to magic was informed by Augustinian demonological ideas and intensified by the politics of defending and advertising the merits of St Thomas and yet he still had a sense of where the boundary lay between 'natural' and 'demonic' practices. He had the saint appear to a noblewoman and criticise her for using 'natural' remedies to cure paralysis of the hands – but the criticism was framed simply as a failure of her faith in the saint which demanded a rebuke.⁵¹

What defined the boundary between natural remedy and dangerous magic is hard to identify from truncated references in the *miracula* but magic seems to have involved the ritualised invocation of spirits, through gestures and incantations, in addition to the manipulation of substances. Penitentials illuminate this to some extent and it is especially striking that the variant version of Bartholomew Iscanus's manual warned against the utterance of anything more than the Lord's Prayer as medicinal herbs were collected. John of Salisbury meditated at greater length on the point at which manipulation of natural properties became dangerous. In many ways John could afford to be more tolerant of the study of occult virtues because he did not need to defend the miraculous patch of a particular saint and because he was liberated by a robust awareness of ordered nature. But, if some uses of natural properties could be practically valuable and intellectually and morally defensible, then it became correspondingly more important to indicate the boundaries of tolerable practice and mark them clearly. So John spilt plenty of ink spelling these out. He accepted, for example, that 'dry' bones might be used in healing and apotropaic ritual but drew the line at the employment of blood because 'if use is made

⁴⁹ See for example the provisions of Lateran IV in *Decrees*, pp. 245–6. John of Salisbury makes the point that the physician must not trespass on the territory of faith by placing too much confidence in naturalising explanation of illness. See JS, *Pol.*, I., pp. 166–7.

⁵⁰ *Vita et Passio et Miracula Thomae Auctore Willelmo*, in *Becket Materials*, I, pp. 382–3. There was also some criticism of monks for using relics of the saint in similar sorts of practices, *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

of blood we enter the domain of the Black Art' – which, he pointed out, 'is so-called because it depends entirely on enquiring of the dead'.⁵² Blood carried connotations of sacrifice and pagan invocation of evil angels, still serving as a marker of heathenism in penitential handbooks and canon law collections, and so it was a logical way to imagine the boundaries of acceptability.

John of Salisbury's effort to distinguish the limits of the tolerable represents a point on a curve in developing ideas about 'natural' properties and virtues which ultimately allowed the partial rehabilitation of some magic during the course of the thirteenth century. Two shifts helped this development. First, we have already observed that paganism was vanishing, even as a fear haunting the imaginations of churchmen. John may have rescued one fragment of the old anti-pagan rhetoric but he integrated the idea of blood-sacrifice into a new understanding of black magic which was the central target of his criticism. More generally, dwindling fears about paganism made it possible to break the connection between pagan religion and magic which had been fostered in generations of early medieval penitentials. Churchmen could now conceive and weigh magic in its own terms and dissect the practice into tolerable and intolerable forms as John had begun to do. Such dissection was stimulated by a second tendency. As the idea of an ordered and regular nature was intellectualised, opportunities emerged to ground the exploration of natural properties in a respectable learned tradition of inquiry. Some 'magic' might therefore be retrieved and 'naturalised', a process in its infancy in the late twelfth century but more clearly visible in the thirteenth. Albertus Magnus embraced the idea of natural magic based on special properties and occult virtues, and William of Auvergne, although in many ways theologically conservative, was willing to tolerate the practice too.⁵³ As we shall see, the acceptance of some magic as natural required a firmer condemnation of the rest as demonic. But, before we turn to the aggressive official anathematising of the black arts, we need to explore another group of practices which had a substantial bearing on how that dark magic was imagined.

DIVINATION

Where the manipulation of occult virtues and natural properties could involve dubious means and doubtful ends, there was a greater theological

⁵² JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 51. On the uses of blood in necromancy see Flint, *Magic*, pp. 52–3.

⁵³ Peters, *Magician*, pp. 89–95.

difficulty in efforts to discern the future.⁵⁴ The Old Testament, with its attacks on wizards, interpreters of omens and soothsayers offered a scriptural basis for criticisms which found expression in two principal objections formulated in the church's official teachings. Both focused on the affront these individuals delivered to faith.⁵⁵ First, it was argued that divination intimated that the pattern of future events might be predetermined, an idea which could have unacceptable consequences for beliefs about God's freedom of action. Secondly, efforts to see, and perhaps to modify, the future implied man's distrust of divine providence.⁵⁶ Fundamental objections of this kind filtered down through early medieval law codes and penitential manuals, which incorporated lists of prohibited divinatory practices ranging from *sortilegia* to augury and *aruspicia*.⁵⁷ A similar pattern of hostility to these arts developed in canon law, synodal legislation, penitentials and *exempla* of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.⁵⁸

Yet, despite the clarity of the theoretical objections and the precision with which normative texts listed forbidden forms of prognostication, in practice it proved much more difficult to anathematise efforts to discern the future. As we have seen, the church freely embraced the idea that God might show signs or send prophecies to the faithful which disclosed his intentions. These had the deepest and most impeccable scriptural credentials. Old and New Testaments were stuffed with *signa* and the Old Testament, though harshly critical of most divination, tolerated clero-mancy (a species of lot-casting performed by priests) and some oneiromancy (interpretation of dreams). The same pattern emerged in the

⁵⁴ On methods for seeing the future see Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 85–90.

⁵⁵ Scripture offered relatively few concessions on the subject of divination. Deuteronomy listed magicians whose arts were forbidden including augurs, soothsayers, diviners and necromancers (see Deut. 18:10–11). The exceptions in the general pattern of condemnation were some forms of dream-divination or oneiromancy (see Genesis 40:5–8; Daniel 1: 17) and also the casting of lots (see 1 Chron. 24:5). For fuller discussion see Kruger, *Dreaming*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ See Flint, *Magic*, pp. 88–92.

⁵⁷ Several early law codes enacted measures against seeing the future: 'Selections from the Laws of Cnut (I and II Cnut)', in *Councils and Synods* I, i, pp. 489, 614; 'Northumbrian Priests' Law', in *Councils and Synods* I, i, p. 461; 'The So-Called Canons of Edgar', in *Councils and Synods* I, i, pp. 319–20. The majority of penitentials included prohibitions of divination, augury or consultation of diviners and augurs: *Poenitentiale Casinense*, in *Die Bussbücher*, pp. 414, 431; *Poenitentiale Anundel*, in *Die Bussbücher*, pp. 462–3; *Das Paenitentiale Pseudo-Gregori*, pp. 177, 183; *Poenitentiale Pseudo-Romanum*, in *Canones Poenitentiales*, pp. 40, 41, 44; *Poenitentiale Pseudo-Egberti*, in *Die Bussordnungen*, pp. 327, 335; Regino of Prüm, *De Synodalibus Causis*, II, pp. 354–65; Burchard, *Decretum*, cols. 833–4, 836–7, 840–1, 851, 961, 965, 970–1.

⁵⁸ For example Gratian rejected all forms of divination including the calendrical and astrological, Kruger, *Dreaming*, pp. 12–13. From the synodal statutes see: 'Statutes of Worcester III', in *Councils and Synods* II, i, p. 303; 'Statutes of Exeter', in *Councils and Synods* II, ii, p. 1062. Robert of Flamborough criticised those who tried to see the future in Robert of Flamborough, *Liber Poenentialis*, p. 263; also inveighing against divination and consultation of augurs, *ibid.*, p. 261–2.

writings of the early Fathers. As Valerie Flint has shown, they offered ambivalent guidance about the acceptability of prognostication.⁵⁹ Although generally hostile to divination, Augustine rejected the idea that men could have no knowledge of future events and both he and Isidore of Seville entertained the notion that some forms of astrology and Christianised lot-casting – such as the *sortes sanctorum* (a strategy which involved lighting candles to a selection of saints and seeing which burnt the longest) or *sortes biblicae* (in which prognostics were taken from the Bible) – might be acceptable.

In the central middle ages, we occasionally find churchmen trying to row back against this tide of concession. Herbert Losinga tried to tackle those tricky archetypes of the ‘good’ astrologer, the *magi* of the gospels, in one of his sermons. He contended, making use of an argument deployed by Isidore of Seville, that the science of the stars was needed then but was redundant now: the wise men ‘being ignorant of spiritual things were led by outward signs’ but in his own day the faithful ‘are enlightened by the daily shining of holy lessons’ and so did not need to place their trust in prognostication.⁶⁰ Despite Herbert’s clever words, continued accommodation remained more common in the central middle ages than this sort of intellectual retrenchment. Indeed, some species of divination had become firmly embedded in orthopraxis. Although John of Salisbury condemned even Christianised forms of lot-casting, few authors of *miracula* blushed at recording how pilgrims chose which shrine they should visit by using the *sortes sanctorum*.⁶¹ Still more strikingly, the *sortes biblicae* had become an established feature of episcopal consecrations.⁶² A gospel book would be opened on the new bishop’s shoulders and a prognostic for his episcopate taken randomly from the page. William of Malmesbury mentions this practice allusively when he describes Wulfstan of Worcester’s inauguration and again, more explicitly, in his account of events when Lanfranc was made archbishop of Canterbury. He even noted that the new prelate greeted his prognostic from Luke 11:41 – ‘give alms and all things are open to you’ – cheerfully.⁶³

⁵⁹ Flint, *Magic*, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Herbert Losinga, *Life, Letters and Sermons*, pp. 40–1. This argument against divinatory and astrological practices was known to other twelfth-century writers. See for example JS, *Pol.*, 1, pp. 52–3; and for an influential early statement of it cf. Isidore, *Etymol.*, bk 8, cap. 9.

⁶¹ JS, *Pol.*, 1, pp. 53–4.

⁶² See G. Henderson, ‘*Sortes Biblicae* in Twelfth-Century England: the List of Episcopal Prognostics in Cambridge, Trinity College ms R.7.5’, in D. Williams (ed.), *England in the Twelfth Century: Proceedings of the 1988 Harlaxton Symposium* (Woodbridge, 1990), pp. 113–35; C. S. F. Burnett, ‘The Prognostications of the Eadwine Psalter’, in M. Gibson, T. A. Heslop and R. Pfaff (eds.), *The Eadwine Psalter: Text, Image and Monastic Culture in Twelfth-Century Canterbury* (London, 1992), pp. 165–7.

⁶³ WM, *GP*, pp. 280, 68–70.

Twelfth-century chroniclers reflected these deep-rooted ambiguities in their own attitudes to efforts to discern the future. They did this partly because they heard mixed official messages but they also did it because their engagement with the patterns and sequences of sacred time made them especially susceptible to accounts of prophecies, divination and astrological predictions. Spurred on by the appearance of signs and the circulation of prognostications, it was but a small step to extrapolate these patterns into future time, dabble in foreknowledge and blur the line between moralising and practical uses of the past.⁶⁴ A story added by Robert of Torigni to the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* illustrates how easy it was for the chronicler to slip across these poorly policed thought-boundaries.⁶⁵ It recounted how a mysterious stranger was seen riding upon the waters of the River Seine near Rouen 'as if he were on land'.⁶⁶ The man not only walked on water but, on being questioned, also possessed a different conception of time, a trait which allowed him to foretell the future. That night he stayed at a guest house and his host asked him many questions about the duke of Normandy and the course of things to come. The mysterious stranger replied that the duke would reign long and flourish until the seventh generation, drawing a furrow in the ashes of the hearth-fire as he explained this. Beyond this, he refused to speculate but, in true oracular fashion, simply 'mingled the furrows he had traced in the ash'. Robert was not nervous about this numinous visitor, nor did he censure the efforts of his host to gain knowledge about the future from him. Instead he himself searched for meaning in that final ambiguous gesture and argued that it portended 'troubles and dissensions'. Robert thought recent history validated this view and argued that 'this we have seen fulfilled to a great extent' because 'we have survived King Henry, who held the seventh place in his dynasty'.⁶⁷ Here the chronicler's urgent search for pattern and meaning working in the past and extending into the future extinguished misgivings about prognostication and questions about the seer's moral status. But, as this happened, his engagement

⁶⁴ Lesley Coote has observed that prophecy often possessed a similar syntactical structure and literary form to annals. Here prophecy was drawing on the established style of the historical annal to represent itself as 'annals of future time' which would come to pass if specified conditions were met. See L. A. Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2000), p. 30.

⁶⁵ This story, which seems to have been adapted from one in the *Brevis Relatio*, was part of a collection of material forming a body of *additamenta* appended to the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*. For a full discussion by Elisabeth Van Houts see William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, II, pp. 280–1, n. 4; also 'Brevis Relatio', pp. 20–1, 42–4.

⁶⁶ William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, II, pp. 284–5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* For the possible significance of the seventh generation for the ruling Norman house see 'Brevis Relatio', pp. 20–1.

with past and future shifted: the idea of his history as an illumination of divine providence was subsumed by a historical curiosity which was more political and practical than moralising.

A similar easy slippage occurs in Robert's own *Chronica*, as the moral value of the predictions he recorded speedily gave way to their practical usefulness. He described prognostications on the basis of an anticipated eclipse which would, in 1179, prefigure terrible events in the Latin East, including earthquakes, disease and the fall of cities to the Saracens. Robert's ostensible reason for writing about this was a moral one and he said in a phrase echoing with the world's fragility, that such catastrophes would be 'a wonderful illustration of the mutability of mutable things'.⁶⁸ But there were also more brutally pragmatic ways of thinking about signs – as a means to predict and escape imminent danger – and these seem to have been at the fore in Robert's mind. There might be Biblical analogies here because signs might be divine warnings to a chosen people, but Robert did not feel the need to invoke such rhetoric. For him the practical point contained its own justification and he warned 'it is intimated to you, that when you see this eclipse, you depart from the country with all your things'.⁶⁹ Even for an ecclesiastical chronicler, reading the signs of the times was as much about saving skins as souls, about encouraging the avoidance of disaster as revealing divine power.

PROPHECY

The conviction that the world was a sea of often intelligible signs was complemented by an awareness that it was also seeded with more specific prophecies gifted not only to pious believers but also to others outside the charmed circle of the faith.⁷⁰ The general willingness of chroniclers to discuss prophecy, particularly where it seemed to have political ramifications, testifies to this sense that nuggets of divinely inspired insight might be widely spread in the world. Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Prophecies of Merlin' enjoyed especially wide circulation in England and Normandy, both as an independent text and as part of his *Historia Regum Britannie*, and exerted a profound influence on the writing of history.⁷¹ They seemed of such moment because Geoffrey had artfully fashioned the text so it appeared that some, at least, of the predictions he had uncovered had already been fulfilled, and this in turn encouraged fevered imaginations to

⁶⁸ RT, pp. 283–4. ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁷⁰ R. W. Southern, 'Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing III: History as Prophecy', *TRHS*, 5th series, 22 (1972), 159–80.

⁷¹ On the widespread acceptance of the prophecies of Merlin see Coote, *Prophecy*, pp. 54–5; J. Crick, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth, Prophecy and History', *Journal of Medieval History*, 18 (1992), 357–71.

see further unfolding of the prophecies in recent events. Many otherwise austere medieval scholars seem to have been caught up in this tide and, despite the supposed origins of the prophecies in the thought of a man of mixed human and demonic nature, they enjoyed a peculiar immunity from theological censure.⁷² John of Salisbury, who was frequently hostile to divination and astrology, was willing to entertain these prophecies. He might attack elements but he never rejected the whole, and this even though he was not sure what sort of spirit had inspired Merlin.⁷³

Others did not spill any ink on the theology and morality of the prophet's words but simply pressed them into service to interpret past and future. Roger of Howden thought the prophecies anticipated the rebellion of earls and barons against Henry II in 1173.⁷⁴ Ralph Diceto bemoaned the homage done by Henry II to Philip of France for his continental lands, claiming fatalistically that this also bore out prophecies of the magician.⁷⁵ He went on to show how the rebellion of Henry II's sons against their father in 1189 had also been foretold by the prophet.⁷⁶ Ralph of Coggeshall claimed that Merlin had correctly predicted John's defeat at the hands of the king of France and the resulting loss of his continental possessions.⁷⁷ Even the austere Orderic, who we might expect to be more wary of worldly prophecy than some of his peers, held that Merlin's words warranted attention because 'the said prophet predicted the course of things to come in the northern isles, and preserved it in writing in figurative language'. Orderic had probably seen an early manuscript of the independently circulated prophecy-text and said that he did not want to write a commentary on the material but he was still willing to give brief extracts for the benefit of scholars who had not yet encountered it.⁷⁸ In doing this he defended Merlin (and himself) against

⁷² Southern, 'European Tradition III', p. 168. When they were systematically attacked by William of Newburgh the grounds for criticism were historical rather than theological, William claiming that Geoffrey had produced a false history.

⁷³ *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, eds. W. J. Millor and H. E. Butler, rev. C. N. L. Brooke, 2 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1979–86), II, pp. 134–5; 668–9. He also tried to distinguish between true and false prophecy. See JS, *Pol.*, I, pp. 166–7.

⁷⁴ RH, II, p. 47.

⁷⁵ Ralph Diceto, *Radulphi de Diceto Decani Lundoniensis Opera Historica, the Historical Works of Ralph of Diceto Edited from the Original Manuscripts*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols. (RS, 1878), II, p. 64. For the original prophecies see Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth with Contributions to the Study of its Place in British History*, eds. and trans. A. Griscom and R. Ellis Jones (London, 1929), pp. 384–90; and for discussion see J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (Berkeley, 1950), pp. 171–7, 403–21.

⁷⁶ Ralph Diceto, *Opera Historica*, II, pp. 67–8. ⁷⁷ RC, p. 146.

⁷⁸ OV, VI, pp. 384–9. Orderic was drawing here on Geoffrey of Monmouth: for his handling of Merlin's prophecies see Coote, *Prophecy*, p. 54.

doubters by measuring some of the wizard's claims against recent history to test and tease out their meanings. This, he seemed to think, was a sufficient defence of their authenticity, contending that 'some part of it, I know, has already been fulfilled in past events; and unless I am mistaken more will be proved true with sorrow or joy by future generations'.⁷⁹

Orderic's handling of these prophecies is especially interesting because there is a sense here of an author being pushed into tackling them by their high standing in the historical canon and the wider world. He needed to talk about them but would not say too much; he said that they were outside the 'sequence' or 'order' of his narrative and yet they had to be included in it somehow because they seemed to be 'true'. And Orderic was even obliged to soften his language a little in his dealings with this material. Where he tended to speak elsewhere of God's works in the world as *inscrutabilia* (a word which stressed the limitations of what man could know), here he conceded far more about the scrutability of a divine plan revealed in 'secular' prophecy. In the light of Merlin's predictions, princes still had to await patiently 'future events that are ordained for them by God's ineffable arrangement (*diuinitus ineffabili dispositione*)' but they might know what was coming even if they could not fully discern the purposes. Just as it was 'clearer than daylight to the thinking man' that Merlin had predicted the death of William Rufus, defeat of Robert of Normandy and firm rule of Henry I, so 'after this fashion wise men may clearly decipher the rest'.⁸⁰ Orderic would not decrypt the prophecies himself, nor would he give his reader all of their matter, but he conceded that these things might be done by others.

Even the one strikingly dissident voice in the many treatments of Merlin's words, that of William of Newburgh, illustrates how deeply embedded was the idea that reliable prophecy might emanate from a man of mixed human and demonic nature. Julia Crick has observed that William's attack on Geoffrey's writings about the future was not driven by any general animus against 'worldly' prophecy but rather was impelled by the politics of his own historical project. In privileging English affairs and anchoring his narrative in Bede, he sought to discredit Brittonic traditions which Geoffrey had (re)invented and strove to undermine political legends which might have been of use to the resurgent Welsh.⁸¹ What William's criticism seems to reveal is that Merlin's prophecies were sufficiently bound up with notions of truthful and morally acceptable prediction to demand a linguistic shift if an attack was to hit

⁷⁹ OV, vi, pp. 386–7. ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 388–9.

⁸¹ J. Crick, 'The British Past and the Welsh Future: Gerald of Wales, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthur of Britain', *Celtica*, 23 (1999), 60–75.

home. William worked by transforming prophecy into dangerous divination, thus tainting the magician's words through labels connotative of paganism and demons. He stressed that, because Merlin's powers came from his demonic father, he must have been shut out from the light of God and could only have used the superior wits which resulted from his mixed nature to make plausible conjectures about the future. There could be no hard and fast knowledge emanating from such dark origins. His could not be 'authentic prophecies' (*autenticas prophetias*) but rather they must be 'most false divinations' (*diuinationes fallacissimas*) or 'divinatory tricks' (*diuinationum praestigiis*).⁸² They were as morally impoverished as Geoffrey's larger project was historically bankrupt, the whole, as William observed, being stitched together from the *figmenta* and *fabula* of the Welsh and formed by the author into a tissue of 'mendacious fictions'.

The rhetorical energy invested by William in his attack on Merlin's prophecies, mobilising both historical and theological criticism, illustrates the difficulty of overturning the prevailing wisdom that they were morally acceptable and historically and politically useful. The preponderant tolerance of such predictions even in the writings of churchmen also indicates why there was so much space for the circulation of prophecies and for the practice of divinatory arts in the wider world. The fineness of official lines between forbidden divination and permitted inspection of signs, between divinely inspired prophecy and demonically generated illusion blurred the boundaries of acceptability. So it comes as little surprise that chronicles reflect and describe a world in which the arts of prognostication were widely sought and attended to. Roger of Howden thought people of varied social groups and status took them seriously. He told how, when the people (*populus*) heard about astrological predictions of impending disaster in 1186, they became alarmed and 'the nearer the pestilential season drew (that the before-named astrologers had predicted) the more great terror came upon everyone'.⁸³ Such fear transcended social category and class. 'Clergy and laity, rich and poor (*clericos et laicos, diuites et pauperes*)' were all, according to Roger, vulnerable to it, and great numbers were driven to desperation by circulating news of the impending signs.

The imaginative power of prognostication can also be seen quite clearly in numerous well-documented cases of political prophecy. Lesley Coote has shown how such predictions were attended to and used by churchmen, especially those with a large stake in public affairs, historical and prophetic material being often bound up in manuscripts

⁸² WN, I, pp. 11–19. ⁸³ RH, II, p. 296.

associated with them.⁸⁴ Members of the lay elite seem also to have taken prophecy seriously. Coote has noted that the 'Anarchy' of Stephen's reign added extra stimulus to the search for prophetic insight into the political future but a base flow of interest runs throughout our period.⁸⁵ Orderic Vitalis recounted how Queen Matilda, wife of William I, had sent word to a 'good and holy hermit' in Germany who possessed the gift of prophecy because she was worried about the future of her sons.⁸⁶ She sent him gifts, begged his prayers for her family and sought 'a prophecy of what would befall them in the future'. Roger of Howden noted Richard I's interest in the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore because they touched his crusading enterprises.⁸⁷ Similarly, a shadowy Welsh soothsayer named Meilyr was presented by Gerald of Wales engaging in political prophecy for the benefit of a prince, foretelling that Hywel, the son of Iorwerth of Caerleon, need not, despite his raiding activities, fear the wrath of Henry II, as the king would be otherwise occupied in Ireland.

The general power of political prophecy is often underscored even in those moments when princes scorned or were sceptical about it. In a light-hearted story Gerald of Wales depicted Henry II confounding 'heathen and superstitious' predictions associated with the Lechlaver stone which was set in the bridge over the River Alun near St David's cathedral.⁸⁸ Returning from Ireland via that church, Henry was berated by a spurned petitioner who called on the stone to bring vengeance down on the king. Henry knew the old prophecy (said to be derived from those of Merlin) which claimed that no prince who conquered Ireland would cross the Lechlaver stone and live. So, perhaps mindful of the crowd, he immediately set about proving it wrong by marching across the bridge (though not, according to Gerald, before a wit had pointed out that he might not be the king to conquer the Irish). More darkly, King John set about discrediting the dangerous prediction uttered by Peter of Pontefract that the king would lose his realm on Ascension Day 1212.⁸⁹ Although he was initially reluctant to take these claims seriously, the spread of the prediction encouraged the king to take action. Peter was seized and imprisoned and John saw the day of his supposed demise out, only then sending Peter to the gallows and leaving his supporters to seek solace in figurative rather than literal readings of their visionary's claims. Accepted or scorned, political prophecy seems to have mattered enough

⁸⁴ Coote, *Prophecy*, pp. 56–63. ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59. ⁸⁶ OV, III, pp. 104–8.

⁸⁷ See RH, III, p. 75; Coote, *Prophecy*, p. 57; M. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: a Study in Joachimism* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 6–12.

⁸⁸ GW, IK, pp. 107–9; GW, EH, pp. 104–6.

⁸⁹ Walter of Coventry, *Memoriale Fratris Walteri de Coventry: the Historical Collections of Walter of Coventry (from Brutus to 1225)*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols. (RS, 1872–3), II, pp. 208–12.

to a sufficient number of people in twelfth- and early thirteenth-century England to oblige kings to engage with it whether they believed it themselves or not.

The social usefulness of prophecy and prognostication also created demand for it at lower levels of the social hierarchy. Hermit hagiographies frequently celebrated the holy man's powers of second sight but we should note that these gifts often stretched to matters of social utility as well as of moral illumination.⁹⁰ Walter Map described how a Welsh hermit named Helyas who lived in the Forest of Dean possessed the gift and used it to detect thieves. Map recounted how Helyas had uncovered through his powers the theft of a mare by a certain Richard the Ferryman. Map lauded him – 'no-one doubts that in this case Helyas was a prophet' – but here the prophetic spirit was more than a sign of holiness, it also acquired a practical value in meeting the worldly needs of the faithful.⁹¹ In such stories, we glimpse how prophecy might be 'vernacularised', the services of visionaries and soothsayers being sought out as a buttress against future insecurity and worldly misfortune. The powerful action of such social considerations on the holy helps to explain why the sharp lines of normative sources needed to be fudged in practice and why toleration was extended to the less immediately menacing species of prognostication. This was a world in which prophecy (and divination) had a powerful allure for men and women seeking after wondrous knowledge, whether in the heights of turbulent politics or in the everyday world of the village.

GERALD OF WALES ON PROPHETS AND DIVINERS

Gerald of Wales offers us a number of studies of the cultural compromise which this demanded as he describes prophecy and divination in the heartlands and marches of Wales. He was cautious in handling this material but a marked feature of his approach is an unwillingness to visit stubborn condemnation on efforts to discern the future which, in several cases, appear strikingly heterodox. Indeed, Gerald was eager to entertain explanations of such practices which might rescue them from censure. The first of these cases is in *Descriptio Kambriae* where he discussed the strange shamanistic *awenyddion*, visionaries whose ecstatic behaviour and gift of second sight indicated either demonic possession or divine

⁹⁰ In the later middle ages a great many magical and liturgical strategies were geared to discovering lost or stolen goods or disclosing the identity of a thief. See for examples Wilson, *Magical Universe*, p. 390; 'Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories', ed. M. R. James, *EHR*, 37 (1922), 413–22 at p. 420.

⁹¹ Map, p. 146.

inspiration.⁹² Reflecting that the *awenyddion* did not match the standard topos of the inspired holy man, Gerald described how they 'behave as if their minds were led away', appeared to lose control of their senses 'as if they were rapt outside their bodies' and uttered things which seemed at first nonsensical but which on closer inspection contained special wisdom.⁹³

Gerald's words were carefully measured in this matter. He knew a great deal about possession and the false dreams and visions conjured up by evil angels to 'entangle the mind in vanities and deceits'. He also knew that demons might communicate the truth in order to snare visionaries and diviners into trusting their powers. Yet he was still reluctant to pursue this explanation and edged round the idea that the *awenyddion* were possessed.⁹⁴ He noted that 'if you should inquire, scrupulous reader, by what spirit such prophecies are made possible, I do not necessarily say by divination (*pithonico*) or by way of demons'.⁹⁵ Caught between the possibility of divine and demonic interpretation, Gerald temporised: 'it is possible that they are speaking through demons which possess them, spirits which are ignorant but in some way inspired'.⁹⁶ They are accustomed to receive these gifts of divination mostly through visions which they see in dreams.⁹⁷ But he also indicated that the soothsayers conceived their practices in a Christian framework. Believing that their powers came from God, Gerald described how 'when they are going into a trance, they invoke the true and living God, and the Holy Trinity, and they pray that they may not be prevented by their sins from revealing the truth'.⁹⁸ So, as in other cases of ambiguous wonder, Gerald suspended judgement. He thought that this sort of prophecy was ultimately in the same category as dreams which 'I think we should sometimes believe and sometimes disbelieve, just as we do rumours'.⁹⁹

Gerald it seems was inclined to be expansive and tolerant when it came to prophecy, seeing its seeds scattered widely (even somewhat indiscriminately) in the world. Exploring the idea more generally, he was eager to stress that the prophetic spirit was gifted not only to devout believers

⁹² On possession see N. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2003).

⁹³ GW, DK, pp. 194–5.

⁹⁴ Gregory the Great, *Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great*, trans. O. J. Zimmerman, 2 vols., Fathers of the Church Series (New York, 1959), 1, p. 262.

⁹⁵ Note here the connotations of *pithonico*, a term which hints at divination through a familiar spirit (perhaps a demon). See for example its use in Deuteronomy 18:11 and Acts 16:16.

⁹⁶ For the problems of distinguishing demonic and divine dreams see Kruger, *Dreaming*, pp. 50–2. On prophetic trances see C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. J. and A. Tedeschi (London, 1983), esp. pp. 1–33; S. O. Glosecki, *Shamanism and Old English Poetry* (London, 1989).

⁹⁷ GW, DK, p. 195. ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6. ⁹⁹ GW, EH, pp. 294–6; GW, IK, p. 111.

but also to sinners and unbelievers too. He pointed to the predictions of the 'two' Merlins (Merlin Celidonius and Merlin Ambrosius) of Welsh tradition and countered those who said neither had about him any marks of holiness and so their words were not to be trusted.¹⁰⁰ Their prognostications of the fall of the kingdom of the Britons first to Saxons and then to Normans were, he contended, not unlike those made by Calchas or Cassandra concerning the fall of Troy (to whose inhabitants Geoffrey's spurious history had also successfully linked the Welsh).¹⁰¹ These ancient prophecies, for all their pagan taint, had still come true. Moreover he explained that 'the spirit of prophecy was not given only to the holy but sometimes to unbelievers and gentiles, to Baal and to Sibyl, and even to the wicked, such as Caiaphas and Baal again'.¹⁰²

Similar moral expansiveness marks Gerald's treatment of divinatory practices which had an even cloudier moral basis than the words of the soothsayers. He described how the renowned sheep-farming Flemings of Rhos in south Wales would boil the shoulder-blades of rams and examine their indentations and protuberances in order to discern what was going on in far away places. By these means, he explained, 'they declare with great confidence the signs of peace and of war, murders and fires, the adulteries of married people and the welfare of the reigning king, especially his life and death'.¹⁰³ This practice, 'scapulimancy', as it has been technically described, was employed for purely prudential ends. We learn that 'many people foretold from the shoulder-bones of rams the devastation of their homeland which was to follow the death of Henry I' and that they were also able to determine the identity of thieves and the activities of adulterers.¹⁰⁴ Again, Gerald was willing to cut considerable slack here to heterodox prognostication. From his vantage point on the theological fence, these practices were not socially disordering and did not threaten the authority of the church. As the Welsh soothsayers had called upon the Trinity, so the divinations of the Flemings disclosed hidden sins rather than giving obvious access to dangerous knowledge. The art of the scapulimancer was also not inconsistent with a view of the world which vested in created things all manner of occult virtues, a view to which Gerald was disposed by his interest in naturalising explanation. So he stood back and chose his words carefully, caught between the unorthodoxy of the practice and its apparent efficacy: 'it is wonderful that such illicit conjurations make actions manifest to the eyes and ears by means of a certain imagined verisimilitude'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ GW, *DK*, pp. 196–200. Cf. GW, *IK*, pp. 133–4.

¹⁰¹ GW, *DK*, pp. 196–7.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁰³ GW, *IK*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–9.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Difficult as these passages are, we cannot easily dismiss them as rhetorical or reflexive compositional devices. There is certainly a self-conscious literariness about them but Gerald seems nonetheless to have been engaging with the social realities of local cultures as he wrestled with divination and prophecy. Even the mysterious art of scapulimancy was not a flight of fancy. Charles Burnett has uncovered further evidence for the practice in twelfth-century England and revealed a learned tradition which disseminated knowledge through technical manuscripts which are most probably translations of Arabic works.¹⁰⁶ Burnett's researches have pointed to scholars such as Adelard of Bath and Walcher of Malvern who had interests in the broader field of this Arabic learning and it is possible that through them, or others in their circles, the techniques of scapulimancy may have been more generally diffused.¹⁰⁷ Burnett has suggested therefore that Gerald's stories about use of the art in Henry I's reign were not flights of literary fancy but had a basis in local practice. Gerald's grapplings with these ideas were thus not mere intellectual parlour games but attempts by a churchman with pastoral experience to fit unofficial practices into a moral and theological framework.

Gerald's intellectual formation and consequent sensitivity to naturalising explanation may also have encouraged his openness to this kind of reflection. And yet this knowledge may also have proved a mixed blessing. It promised new ways of thinking about ecstatic visionaries and scapulimantic diviners by offering a neutral moral category in which they could be located but it ultimately could not deliver satisfying explanations. As Nancy Caciola has indicated, Gerald was among an *avant garde* popularising physical explanations of demonic possession. He was able to describe how demons could possess body cavities and offered an 'optics' of demon visions which accounted for the apparent corporeality of spirits.¹⁰⁸ He was also willing to speculate about a 'vital spirit' which sustained a visionary's body while his or her soul travelled through heaven.¹⁰⁹ And yet, as Caciola has also argued, these naturalising explanations could not capture the full complexity of possession, demon vision and prophetic trances. In privileging close reading of external signs or perturbations on the body's surface, they gave no access to the spiritual forces at work within the practitioner or visionary and often heightened rather than diminished a sense of their profound ambiguity.¹¹⁰ Thus, for

¹⁰⁶ On scapulimancy see C. S. F. Burnett, 'Arabic Divinatory Texts and Celtic Folklore: a Comment on the Theory and Practice of Scapulimancy in Western Europe', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 6 (1983), 31–42; and for later examples see Wilson, *Magical Universe*, p. 388.

¹⁰⁷ See Burnett, 'Arabic Divinatory Texts', pp. 31–42.

¹⁰⁸ Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pp. 179–94, 207–15; GW, *IK*, pp. 120–1. ¹⁰⁹ See GW, *TH*, p. 49.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 214–15.

all his learning, Gerald was forced into ambivalence about the Welsh *awenyddion* and Flemish scapulimancers, unable to determine where on the moral spectrum their gifts and skills ultimately lay.

In the twelfth century, ambivalence about the moral status of wondrous knowledge of future things ran through society, the church and also through individual churchmen. Gerald himself stands as a case study of that very complexity. The arts of divination might routinely be condemned by the church in its penitential manuals and canon law collections but attachment to the possibilities of foreknowledge was in part consistent with a view of the world which the church nourished. The idea that time was studded with signs and signals tended to invite their technical investigation and such searching was also encouraged by awareness that the world was filled with things containing occult virtues and special properties. Further stimulus was added by social need, by the immense value perceived in practices which might allow the avoidance of disaster or the detection of crime. Just as Augustine had tolerated Christianised efforts to acquire knowledge of the future, so many churchmen of the twelfth century were willing to permit it as well. Indeed, they had greater latitude for such tolerance because for them divination was no longer seen to be linked to a living, rival structure of religious belief. The outward forms of a practice, even the ecstatic trances of visionaries and arcana of inspecting ram's bones, were not a sure guide to the non-Christian affiliations of their practitioners because now they were often invested with Christian language, and stories about them were played out in Christian moral settings. In consequence, the lines between acceptable and unacceptable efforts to gain knowledge of the future would need to be drawn in a different place and in a new way.

ASTROLOGY

The business of inscribing this line was complicated by influxes of astrological learning from the east which promised foreknowledge on a new and grander scale. Technical interpretative skills and new devices such as the astrolabe meant that the well-established general awareness that the movements of the spheres indicated the course of human affairs was now converted into more precise reading of the heavens.¹¹¹ This

¹¹¹ See H. Carey, *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages* (Basingstoke, 1992), pp. 8–9; E. Grant, *Planets, Stars and Orbs: the Medieval Cosmos 1200–1687* (Cambridge, 1994); S. J. Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, 1987); T. O. Wedel, *The Mediaeval Attitude Toward Astrology, Particularly in England* (New Haven, 1920); J. D. North, 'Medieval Concepts of Astrological Influence', in P. Curry (ed.), *Astrology, Science and Society* (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 5–17.

development, and the associated emergence of semi-professional astrol-ogers skilled in the art, can be traced back to the late eleventh century, as Arabic learning spread from centres in Spain.¹¹² Adelard of Bath, Daniel of Morley, Petrus Alfonsi and also churchmen such as Walcher, prior of Malvern, all had an interest in this, and knowledge of astrology seems to have been cultivated at a number of religious houses in the south west of England, including Malvern, Hereford and Worcester.¹¹³ According to William of Malmesbury, Robert Losinga of Hereford, who was learned in the science of the stars, enjoyed close ties of 'holy friendship' with Wulfstan of Worcester, suggesting one vector along which new learning might have travelled between houses.¹¹⁴ Richard Southern's studies of Worcester manuscripts indicate more firmly the circulation of knowledge about the science of the stars in the west country at an early date.¹¹⁵ One of these texts, Oxford, Corpus Christi MS 157, dates from c.1130 but suggests the steady accumulation of practical astrological wisdom at Worcester from the 1090s onwards (including, for example, the lunar observations made by Walcher of Malvern as early as 1091–2). This helps to explain why Orderic Vitalis, who had spent some time in Worcester, probably at some point between 1114 and 1123, was already deferring in his *Ecclesiastical History* to certain wise *astrologi* who understood the *secreta physicae* and had interpreted the comet which appeared in 1066.¹¹⁶

If this new learning put down roots in religious institutions where the heads were sympathetic, it also seems to have spread beyond the cloister wall, finding audiences among elites beset by ambitions and fears and attracted by the idea that the future might be mapped. There is certainly some evidence that awareness of astrology, just like growing interest in prophecy, was spreading through the aristocracy during Stephen's turbulent reign. Raymond of Marseilles famously dedicated a treatise on the astrolabe to Robert, earl of Leicester (d. 1168) in c.1140.¹¹⁷ In his preface, he evangelised for the new art and argued that astrology had moved beyond its original compass and now offered the chance to know 'not only the present, but also the past and the future'.¹¹⁸ Another efflorescence of astrological activity may have occurred subsequently at the court of Henry II. Adelard of Bath may even have helped to communicate this

¹¹² See Wedel, *Astrology*, p. 55; North, 'Concepts of Astrological Influence', pp. 5–17; also Dronke, *Twelfth-Century Philosophy*, pp. 113–148. For Adelard see above, pp. 29–30.

¹¹³ Southern, *Robert Grosseteste*, pp. xxxiv–xlvii.

¹¹⁴ *William of Malmesbury Saints' Lives: the lives of SS. Wulfstan, Dunstan, Patrick, Benignus and Indract*, eds. M. Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 2002), pp. 140–1.

¹¹⁵ R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford, 1970), p. 168.

¹¹⁶ OV, II, pp. 134–5. ¹¹⁷ See Southern, *Robert Grosseteste*, p. 104; Carey, *Courting Disaster*, p. 27.

¹¹⁸ Southern, *Robert Grosseteste*, p. 104.

interest, as he served as tutor to Henry in his youth and perhaps sharpened his young charge's awareness of the science of the stars. In any event, the prognosticatory arts excited the interest of the curial cleric Roger of Howden and alarmed the other churchmen-courtiers John of Salisbury, Peter of Blois and Walter Map.¹¹⁹ Even William of Newburgh, writing at a considerable remove from the court in the 1190s, incorporated several admonitory stories about nobles misled by the predictions of diviners.¹²⁰ This pattern of broadening interest is consistent with that identified by Theodore Wedel who suggested that diffusion of knowledge about astrology among the aristocracy could be mapped impressionistically by looking at references to it in romance literature. He noted that these were absent from the *lais* of Marie de France, appear occasionally in Chrétien's *Erec* but are much more frequent and fully developed in later works such as *Beroul* (written 1190×1200) and thirteenth-century 'Matter of Britain' romances.¹²¹

If spreading awareness of this new learning can be sketched, its early appeal is also easy enough to fathom because to its patrons it promised valuable knowledge and to its practitioners a means to rise in the world through useful service.¹²² But to grasp astrology's developing imaginative power in the twelfth century we need to remember the context in which it grew. Astrology was less 'magic', more 'science', belonging not to the magical arts but to a group of technical forms of knowledge which were evolving in many areas of experience. Its essentially practical and empirical status is hinted at even by William of Malmesbury who, in describing Walcher of Malvern's skill in the liberal arts, listed in quick succession the prior's knowledge of the abacus, calendrical calculations and 'course of the stars of the heavens'.¹²³ By the late twelfth century, the appeal of such technical knowledge went wider and deeper and ceased to be a matter of cloistered speculations. The fostering of specialist learning dealing with law, experience of increasingly sophisticated systems of government bureaucracy, even the creation of complex accounting practices, showed how reason, often wielded by a learned ministerial class, could be applied to the problems of everyday lives.¹²⁴ Astrology might be seen as another technical means by which worried abbots and nervous nobles might defend themselves against future disaster and it was on this kind of alarm that men like Adelard and Raymond were able to trade.

¹¹⁹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 357. ¹²⁰ WN, II, pp. 424–7.

¹²¹ Wedel, *Astrology*, pp. 91–4, 107.

¹²² On ambition at court see Murray, *Reason and Society*, pp. 103–4. ¹²³ WM, GP, pp. 300–1.

¹²⁴ On this issue see Murray, *Reason and Society*, pp. 111–16.

The emergence of astrology and its spread engendered two kinds of responses among churchmen. One, the minority response, was to question its effectiveness.¹²⁵ Roger of Howden, a secular churchman at Henry II's court and sometime royal justice, exemplifies this practical approach by weighing evidence *pro* and *contra* the reliability of a particular series of famous predictions.¹²⁶ Roger borrowed a substantial chunk of text dealing with astrological predictions from the chronicle which goes under the name of Benedict of Peterborough (in fact, as Antonia Gransden has indicated, the work not of a monk but of a secular whose identity remains uncertain). These extracts related how in 1186 'the astrologers both of Spain and of Sicily, as also the diviners throughout almost the whole world, both Greek and Latin, wrote and set forth nearly one and the same opinion as to the conjunction of the planets.'¹²⁷ He began with the words of Corumphiza of Cordova who had warned that 'Almighty God has made known and the science of numbers has disclosed, that the planets, both superior as well as inferior, will come into conjunction in Libra, that is to say in September in the year . . . one thousand one hundred and eighty six.'¹²⁸ Corumphiza explained that eclipses of sun and moon would prefigure the conjunction and then, as it took place, there would be earthquakes 'in those regions where these things have been accustomed to take place'. In the east, winds would blacken the air and peals of bells and voices would be heard in the skies while in the west there would be political strife and war.¹²⁹ Roger then turned to the similarly dire but much more technically detailed predictions of a certain William the Astrologer, clerk to John, the constable of Chester, and laid these out before his readers.¹³⁰

There is no concern about the morality of any of this, the reading of the heavens was glossed as a means to stir the faithful to deeper devotion. The text claimed that William the Astrologer had warned that, faced by impending disaster, 'the only remedy remaining is for princes to be on their guard, to serve God and flee the devil, so the Lord may avert imminent punishments of them'.¹³¹ But Roger was interested in testing the validity of these predictions. In the hard-headed style of a man learned

¹²⁵ For the church's position (which in the writings of early churchmen involved equating the science of the heavens with paganism) see Wedel, *Astrology*, pp. 25–41. The scriptural position on astrology was a blurred one and it was possible to cite Biblical authority for and against it. For the hostile view see Isaiah 47:13; for texts susceptible of more positive glosses see Genesis 1:14; Matthew 2: 1–12; Revelation 11:12–13.

¹²⁶ On Roger of Howden's life see F. Barlow, 'Roger of Howden', *EHR* 65 (1956), 352–60; also Gransden, *Historical Writing c.550–c.1307*, pp. 222–30; also Wedel, *Astrology*, pp. 91–4.

¹²⁷ RH, II, pp. 290–3 at p. 290. ¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 291. ¹²⁹ *Ibid.* ¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

in the law, Roger added the contrary views of 'a certain honest Saracen' named Pharamella who had written to the bishop of Toledo about the 'false astrologers of the West who were ignorant of the virtues of the heavenly bodies'. They had, he said, 'alarmed the hearts of you believers in Christ, and not only such as are simple (*simplices*), but even those among you who are believed to be wise (*sapientes*)'.¹³² Pharamella unpicked the conclusions of the astrologers on a detailed technical basis and on historical grounds, pointing out that the predicted calamities had not occurred at previous conjunctions of the stars.¹³³ So, for the canny Roger, men who traded in *secreta physicae*, for all their profound and technical wisdom, were open to counter-argument, vulnerable to disproof through observation and experience.

The majority of churchmen may well have accepted freely, as Hilary Carey has argued, that astrology worked.¹³⁴ William of Malmesbury noted that Robert Losinga did not bother to travel to the consecration of the new cathedral at Lincoln because he 'had seen for certain by looking at the stars that the consecration would not happen'.¹³⁵ More strikingly, when astrologers foresaw calamity in 1184, the archbishop of Canterbury was moved to proclaim a fast in his diocese in a bid to avert it.¹³⁶ Hence, for most, it was the moral danger inherent in astrology which excited alarm and the old anti-prognosticatory arguments about tempting God surfaced again. Some, such as Alexander Neckham, tried to reconcile theology and astrology by emphasising the absence of any close determining relationship between the movement of the spheres and the lives of men, his wariness also finding expression in a strong tendency to allegorise the workings of astrological systems rather than to notice their practical and prudential value.¹³⁷ Others shared Alexander's concern but engaged much more critically with the idea of astrology and tried to mark more sharply the boundaries of acceptable practice. John of Salisbury said that he did not 'go so far as to believe that great events are never preceded by warning signs, since I have learned that there is in the sun, moon and in the very elements and their furniture portentous meaning derived from the Lord'.¹³⁸ But he also believed that the new learning circulating in England was going too far in its attempts to elucidate the future. He

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 297. ¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 298. ¹³⁴ Carey, *Courting Disaster*, p. 13. ¹³⁵ WM, GP, p. 313.

¹³⁶ Southern, *Robert Grosseteste*, p. 106.

¹³⁷ See R. W. Hunt, *The Schools and the Cloister: the Life and Writings of Alexander Nequam (1157–1217)*, ed. and rev. M. Gibson (Oxford, 1984), pp. 82–3; also Alexander Neckham, *Alexandri Neckham De Naturis Rerum Libri Duo with the Poem of the Same Author, De Laudibus Sapientiae*, ed. T. Wright (RS, 1863), pp. 283, 304–7.

¹³⁸ Carey, *Courting Disaster*, pp. 30–1; Kieckhefer, *Magic*, p. 97. For John of Salisbury's rejection of the new Arabic learning, Kieckhefer, *Magic*, p. 117.

singled out the casters of horoscopes for special criticism, warning that 'by insisting overmuch on the science of celestial bodies for the purpose of divination, they have destroyed not only the knowledge of these but also the knowledge of God'.¹³⁹

A particular kind of aggrandisement of human reason was John's target here. For him, danger lay in the spread of the ingenious wisdom of the astrologer through the court. Significantly, he did not bother to spill ink attacking prognosticatory arts like palmistry because he said these rested on no rational basis and, by implication, he seems to have thought that their imaginative appeal to courtiers would be dented as a result.¹⁴⁰ Astrology, in contrast, was 'the more dangerous in that they [the astrologers] seem to base it upon the firm foundation of nature and reason'.¹⁴¹ And it was clear to John where this thinking might tend. It risked the over-extension and abuse of rational analysis. John argued that 'inquisitive minds investigate the powers of celestial phenomena and endeavour to explain by the rules of their type of astronomy everything which comes to pass in the world below'.¹⁴² Astrology (which elsewhere he distinguished carefully from astronomy which did not attempt precise prediction) exceeded 'the bounds of reason' and 'does not enlighten its exponent but misleads him'.¹⁴³ John allowed that the *astronomer* might, through study of the skies, be able to detect general influences on the lives of men and even 'to presage with sober judgement the character of periods according as they occur in nature and pluck the ripe fruits of speculation'.¹⁴⁴ And this was morally acceptable. But, in going beyond this, in arguing for a determining relationship between the movement of the spheres and human experience, the *astrologer* diminished man's humanity and deprived the creator of his power. The planets were made into false gods and astrologers 'end by wronging the creator ... They ascribe everything to the constellations. Do you see how wrong is done Him who has made heaven, earth and all that is in them? ... The stars impose such compulsion upon things that free will is destroyed.'¹⁴⁵

Just how prevalent astrology and related forms of divination may have been at Henry II's court (probably the prime target of John of Salisbury's polemic) is hard to assess. Hilary Carey has downplayed it, pointing out that John was a hostile witness and that he had little to say about the detail of these illicit practices, relying on classical rather than contemporary illustrations.¹⁴⁶ And yet John's reluctance might owe more to an unwillingness to plant new and dangerous ideas in the minds of his audience (a concern which, after all, inclined Bede to skate swiftly over the minutiae

¹³⁹ JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 112.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 101–2.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 107–8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* ¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Carey, *Courting Disaster*, p. 30.

of paganism) than to the illusory nature of the arts he condemned. His mobilisation of established objections and ancient illustrations was, similarly, not a surprising rhetorical move for a scholar well-versed in sophisticated theology and the classical canon. And his alarm seems real enough. The influx of new (and suspiciously exotic) learning from the east, and apprehension about courtiers only too eager to capitalise on practical reason to help them rise, were a potent combination, connecting the astrological arts to a larger field of curial vices of which they were emblematic. God-given reason exercised within the parameters John defined might be of value, but stretched to extremes it was perilous. Where the study of signs might illuminate scripture, absorption in the prudential reading of the heavens drew men away from the truth and placed their souls in danger.

This helps to explain why some churchmen were hostile to astrology, hostile to the point that they bracketed it with dubious magic, even with black magic. For them, astrological and divinatory arts shared certain characteristics in common with the subtle contrivances of demons. They too had the power to beguile, fascinate and mislead. Worse, behind that outward similarity, some churchmen discerned a still closer connection between astrology and demonic activity because prognostication tempted God.¹⁴⁷ It is this feature of the quest for astrological knowledge, mixed with the suspect exoticism of the new learning from the east, which seems to have nourished another phenomenon of the twelfth century, the fear of the necromancer-diviner. We see in chronicles that the black arts were frequently bundled up with efforts to discern the future, and specifically with skills derived from new mathematical and astrological learning and with connections to the strange lands of the east.¹⁴⁸ In the 1160s or early 1170s, on returning to his *Roman de Rou*, Wace told a story about William the Conqueror's encounter with a diviner who was skilled in starcraft and necromancy. He accurately foretold the duke's successful invasion of England but drowned himself en route.¹⁴⁹ The prince, briefly taken in, only then saw the hollowness of a false prophecy which he had been happy to entertain, the story sounding a warning perhaps for a Henrician court also too inclined to give credit to prognostication. When William of Newburgh conjured up in the 1190s the image of men 'famous in the curious arts' or practising the 'nefarious

¹⁴⁷ See Cohn, *Inner Demons*, pp. 65–74; Russell, *Witchcraft*, pp. 101–32; Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 153–75.

¹⁴⁸ Wedel argued for continued suspicion of astrology running into the thirteenth century, suggesting that the limits of tolerable astrological explanation were only fixed as 'nature' emerged as a sphere of legitimate exploration. See Wedel, *Astrology*, pp. 60–70.

¹⁴⁹ Wace, *Roman de Rou*, p. 164.

art', he connected the cultivation of demons with efforts to discern the future elaborated by mysterious men from 'eastern' centres of learning, particularly Toledo. These men were dangerous because their specialised dark knowledge might be deemed useful in the wider world. William was eager to show that it was unreliable: he argued using contemporary stories, that diviners 'cite truth with the sole intention to deceive' or else 'at times themselves are deceived by their own blindness'.¹⁵⁰ He showed that laymen who engaged the services of diviners came unstuck. Stephen, governor of Anjou, and Aubrey, earl of Northumberland, were both dangerously misled by the diviner's false or flawed predictions.¹⁵¹ Such clerical alarm about new knowledge also indicates something else: that even if necromancers did not exist, it might be pedagogically useful to invent them.

NECROMANCERS AND CHRONICLERS

Evidence for the practice of necromancy in anything approaching the form in which chroniclers depicted it is thin in the twelfth century.¹⁵² The fact that works which William of Auvergne chose to call *libri nigromantiae* fell into his hands in the thirteenth century does not mean that such texts circulated in the twelfth. Nor can we be so sure that William's view (that such books taught the dark arts of summoning spirits) coincided with those of their owners.¹⁵³ When John of Salisbury talked about his personal experience of black magic, it is far from clear that the spirits being invoked by the magician were demons. John told how he and another prospective priest were taught 'scrying' by their apprentice-master, who required them to gaze into basins of water in an effort to discern the future.¹⁵⁴ John argued that the elderly priest conjured with names which seemed to him to be those of demons and warned that he knew of other scryers who had suffered from blindness in later life as a fitting punishment for their sins.¹⁵⁵ And yet there is a hint that the scryers themselves took a different view. John commented that they falsely believed that they 'offered no sacrifices'.¹⁵⁶ And there is also later

¹⁵⁰ WN, II, p. 425. See also JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 144. The model for false prophecy in the Middle Ages was the Witch of Endor as discussed by John of Salisbury, JS, *Pol.*, I, pp. 150–7.

¹⁵¹ WN, II, p. 425. ¹⁵² JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 143.

¹⁵³ But see also Peters, *Magician*, p. 25 who is prepared to take this claim more at face value and in consequence accept the idea that *libri nigromantiae* were in use in the central middle ages.

¹⁵⁴ The involvement of children and virgins in divinatory practices was noted by Apuleius whose works were known to a number of monastic and secular authors. See Apuleius, *Apologia*, trans. H. E. Butler (Oxford, 1909), pp. 77–81; and see also GT, pp. 96–7.

¹⁵⁵ JS, *Pol.*, I, pp. 164–5. ¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

evidence indicating the contested status of these practices, their users often believing they were summoning good rather than evil angels even if detractors continued to denounce theirs as dark arts.¹⁵⁷

Although this underworld is seldom seen directly in our sources, it was certainly feared by contemporaries. John of Salisbury said that necromancers might not appear in public 'but such of them as still exist practise the works of darkness in secrecy'.¹⁵⁸ The imagined identities of these shadowy individuals give us clues about the origins of alarm. Some were presented as learned Jews or bookish Saracens. William of Malmesbury paints a picture of a Saracen scholar of Toledo who learnt the dark arts from special manuscripts and of a skilled Jewish magician who penetrated the mysteries of the Campus Martius by such means.¹⁵⁹ William of Newburgh thought that 'sacriligious magic' was practised by magicians from Toledo who used it to make prognostications from brazen heads or through other contacts with 'delusive spirits'.¹⁶⁰ Ralph of Coggeshall played with similar stereotypes. He told of a Jewish necromancer who wrapped a boy in the skin of a newly dead animal and uttered incantations over the child so that he might see the future.¹⁶¹ Rather later, Bishop Stavensby, legislating for the diocese of Coventry, was also keen to defend the sacraments from magical abuse by Jews but he was worried about their abuse by wicked Christians too.¹⁶² This indicates another group from whom the necromancer might be drawn: the enemy within, a 'clerical underworld', as sketched by Norman Cohn, whose members, though skilled in Christian ritual, elected to set themselves against the faith through a pact with the devil. These practitioners of the black arts were painted by William of Malmesbury in his legend of Gerbert, who learnt the craft in Spain, and in another about an enchanted statue in which a priest of Rome, Palumbus, was able to break a spell by cooperating with demons.¹⁶³ Similarly, Caesarius of Heisterbach imagined necromancers as secular churchmen who turned their hands to calling up evil spirits.¹⁶⁴

These shadowy clergy harnessed a repertoire of utterances, symbols and objects to their projects but many of these were thought to derive from the perversion of the liturgy itself. Norman Cohn observed, 'at

¹⁵⁷ Richard Kieckhefer treats scrying as a species of necromancy but the cases are not always clear-cut, practitioners of the art claiming to summon angels rather than demons. See R. Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: a Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Stroud, 1997), pp. 97–108; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 73–4; 'Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories', pp. 420–1; Wilson, *Magical Universe*, pp. 398–9.

¹⁵⁸ JS, *Pol.*, i, p. 143; also JS, *Pol.*, i, pp. 149–50.

¹⁵⁹ WM, *GR*, i, pp. 280–3. ¹⁶⁰ WN, ii, p. 425–7. ¹⁶¹ RC, p. 191.

¹⁶² 'Statutes of Bishop Stavensby for the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield', in *Councils and Synods* ii, i, p. 210.

¹⁶³ WM, *GR*, i, pp. 382–5. ¹⁶⁴ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, i, pp. 276–9.

the heart of ritual magic was the belief in the irresistible power of certain words and above all the divine name ... recited aloud and in the right circumstances, these prayers were supposed to compel the obedience of demons'.¹⁶⁵ In necromancy this entailed the complete reversal of Christian moral polarities, using prayers to call up and command demons rather than dispel them. This idea was captured by William of Malmesbury. When Cwoenthryth, daughter of Coenwulf of Mercia, wanted to disrupt the funeral liturgies for Kenelm, the brother she had had murdered, she was said to have sung the psalms backwards from a window looking down on the solemnities in an attempt at a nefarious trick (*praestigium*).¹⁶⁶ Here the instrumentalisation of religious practices that we encountered in chapter 3 was imagined being stretched to new and yet more dangerous extremes by people who, in effect, rejected outright the moral frameworks established by the church.¹⁶⁷

This might explain why John of Salisbury needed to explain in detail what was really happening when exorcisms seemed to be used efficaciously in the practice of black magic. He warned that, when necromancers used these rituals, demons simply 'pretend that they are under compulsion and feign that they were drawn forth by virtue of exorcism'. He added that the demons 'feign that rites of exorcism have been conceived, as it were, in the name of the Lord or in the belief of the Trinity or by the virtue of the Incarnation or the Passion'.¹⁶⁸ The intention of the user and moral context of the rite were all: the compulsive power of bell, book and candle was illusory when conceived for such dark purposes. Likewise evil spirits might give the appearance of usefulness while under this feigned compulsion. They might tell truths, puff men up, give them earthly renown and prosperity. But of course these were just stratagems to lure the necromancer to destruction, means to break him on fortune's wheel and catch his soul as it fell; means to let him fly up like Simon Magus, only to watch him dashed on the rocks. Thus in William of Malmesbury's story of Palumbus, we find a demon whom the priest compels to do his bidding with special letters created through his deep knowledge of the

¹⁶⁵ Cohn, *Inner Demons*, pp. 107–8.

¹⁶⁶ WM, GR, I, pp. 392–3. See also *Vita Kenelmi* for a similar account in *Three Eleventh-Century Anglo-Latin Saints' Lives: Vita S. Birini, Vita et Miracula S. Kenelmi, and Vita S. Rumwoldi*, ed. R. Love, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1996), p. 72; and for a further version GW, IK, p. 25.

¹⁶⁷ See Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, pp. 91, 153, 165–7; Kieckhefer, *Magic*, pp. 160–3, 172.

¹⁶⁸ John of Salisbury goes on to expound the immense power of demons to deceive noting that they are able to appear even as angels of light in JS, Pol., I, p. 155–6.

necromancer's craft, crying out to heaven to know when God would finally let him take the magician's soul.¹⁶⁹

Clerical imaginings of necromancy were not simply a basic reflex to rival religious cultures or a self-generating phenomenon produced by official worries about the extension of instrumental piety to horrifying extremes. They were also kindled by scholarly interchange between Christian and Islamic learning during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, interchange which fostered in some religious communities exactly the kind of specialised worldly knowledge, especially astrological knowledge, which many churchmen feared would be dangerous. It is this dimension to alarm about the dark arts which helps to explain one of the most frequent elements in the representation of the necromancer: he consorted with demons to gain knowledge about the future. Although in theory necromancers, like Simon Magus or the magicians of Pharaoh, might perform a great range of illusions and enchantments, in practice their efforts in the twelfth century were very frequently associated with divination.¹⁷⁰ When John of Salisbury condemned necromancers he reached for 'soothsayer' at one point as a synonym; Wace meanwhile depicted a diviner whose art relied on his skill in astronomy and necromancy.¹⁷¹ More strikingly, when William of Malmesbury and William of Newburgh wrote about the darks arts of summoning demons, they conceived their practitioners calling spirits up to hear what the future held.¹⁷²

Thus, efforts to see the future, of which astrology was the most prominent and novel form in our sources, were identified with necromancy by some churchmen who were nervous about the origins and effects of suspect new knowledge. Yet this in turn raises a further question: why was it that some churchmen were so nervous about the new arts as others tolerated or even practised them? In seeking a possible answer, we will let William of Malmesbury be our guide.

¹⁶⁹ WM, GR, I, pp. 382–5.

¹⁷⁰ We hear about a novice monk who, on seeing the moon transformed into mysterious shapes in the middle of the night, feared that he was witnessing a necromancer's malevolent handiwork in *Melrose Chronicle*, pp. 64–6. Tantalisingly schematic claims about similar illusions appeared much later (noted in the entry for 1287) in the annals of Worcester: 'illis diebus iuxta Wroccestre in loco quidem Bilebure, per quendam incantatorem diabolus coactus cuidam puero apparuit, et urnas et nauem et domum cum immenso auro ostendit', *Annales Monastici*, IV, p. 495. For a later magical manual which advises on how to produce illusions of banquets, castles, horses etc. see Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, pp. 42–61.

¹⁷¹ Wace, *Roman de Rou*, p. 164. ¹⁷² Carey, *Courting Disaster*, pp. 8–9.

Of the twelfth-century chroniclers who tackled the summoning up of spirits, William of Malmesbury had the most to say about it. He drew out the idea of the churchman trapped by inquiry into the dangerous knowledge of the east in his version of the legend of Sylvester II (or Gerbert of Aurillac as he was before coming to St Peter's chair). He patterned the narrative in part on the story of Theophilus (who sold his soul to the devil in return for magical powers) but he wove through it many contemporary fears about the dark arts: the renegade churchman, the magical agency of a Saracen, the practice of divination, the lure and lustre of occult knowledge and, of course, the inevitable commerce with demons.¹⁷³ According to William, Sylvester travelled to Toledo, the renowned point of contact between Christian and Arab learning, in order to 'learn astrology and other such arts from the Saracens'.¹⁷⁴ William suggested that Sylvester was drawn into progressively more dangerous forms of this 'technical' knowledge but concentrated in particular on divination and astral magic. In his early studies, Sylvester 'surpassed Ptolemy with the astrolabe, and Alexandria in astronomy, and Julius Firmicus in astrology'.¹⁷⁵ He also 'acquired the art of calling up ghostly forms from Hell' as he steadily uncovered 'whatever harmful or salutary human curiosity has discovered'.¹⁷⁶ Ultimately he stole a magical book owned by a Saracen and forged a pact with the devil. We later learn that he had used his new knowledge to cast 'a head of a statue, by a certain inspection of the stars when all of the planets were about to begin their courses, which did not speak unless spoken to, but then pronounced the truth either in the affirmative or the negative'.¹⁷⁷ By such means, Sylvester intended to capitalise on his magical skills, acquire wealth and fame and guard against sudden death. True to the form of such tales, his confidence was misplaced and the devils which seemed to have submitted themselves so freely to him tricked Sylvester at the last, lured him to an early death and laid claim to his soul.¹⁷⁸

William's story was a variation on old themes. Augustine had warned that men who desired evil things were subjected to illusion and deception

¹⁷³ See Flint, *Magic*, pp. 344–7; Cohn, *Inner Demons*, pp. 233–4; K. Jolly, C. Raudvere and E. Peters (eds.), *Witchcraft in Europe: the Middle Ages* (London, 2000), p. 205.

¹⁷⁴ WM, GR, I, pp. 280–1. ¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 282–3. Stubbs suggests that William may have had a mixture of oral and written sources for this legend. Earlier accounts of Gerbert's interest in technical explorations and the peril into which these led him were given by Hugh of Flavigny, Adhemar and Sigebert of Gembloux but they differ considerably from the story told in *Gesta Regum*. On the legends see R. Allen, 'Gerbert, Pope Sylvester II', *EHR*, 7 (1892), 625–68 at pp. 663–8.

¹⁷⁷ WM, GR, I, pp. 293–4. ¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

as the reward, snared by the activities of the fallen angels.¹⁷⁹ But the variations on the theme are important. First, William's tale is filled with the fear that the search for knowledge about the future coupled with new divinatory learning might pave the way to hell. But secondly, and curiously, it also suggests that some of this new learning might not be dangerous, that it might even be useful. Even in this bluntly didactic piece William admitted that while many of the new things Sylvester discovered in Toledo were harmful, some of them might be salutary. William did not want to anathematise everything that emerged from the Islamic world even as he feared its intellectual and spiritual ramifications. To understand this ambivalence we need to understand the way in which knowledge originating from that world, and particularly astrological learning, was received in Benedictine communities.

The intellectual context in which William of Malmesbury existed helps to explain his measured phraseology and why he needed to draw a distinction between the useful and dangerous uses of *scientia* from the east rather than damning it all. William's house at Malmesbury was fairly close to, and in communication with, other religious communities, at Malvern, Hereford and Worcester in which astrological learning was being cultivated.¹⁸⁰ William himself clearly knew something about astrological books, alleging that Sylvester had read 'Alexandreaus' on astronomy and 'Ptolemy' on the astrolabe.¹⁸¹ He may well have been drawing on his own local knowledge to flesh out his version of the Gerbert legend, mapping the experiences of west-country scholars onto the life of the pope for, although the historical Sylvester had never travelled to Toledo for his studies, Adelard of Bath and others in the twelfth century had made that journey.¹⁸² Similarly, William assumed that Sylvester was a product of Fleury (rather than Aurillac) probably because Fleury was a known hub of astrological and related learning.¹⁸³ Its connections with English Benedictine houses are proclaimed by the significant numbers of

¹⁷⁹ *Sancti Aurelii Augustini, De Doctrina Christiana; De Vera Religione*, eds. J. Martin and K. D. Daur, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 32 (Turnholt, 1962), pp. 57–8.

¹⁸⁰ On this circle see C. S. F. Burnett, 'Mathematics and Astronomy in Hereford and its Region in the Twelfth Century', in D. Whitehead (ed.), *Hereford: Medieval Art, Architecture and Archaeology* (Leeds, 1995), pp. 50–9. For Walcher's epitaph which branded him a 'worthy philosopher, good astrologer, a geometer and abacist', see C. H. Haskins, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science* (New York, 1924), pp. 113–17.

¹⁸¹ WM, GR, II, pp. 152–4.

¹⁸² Adelard translated astrological tables from Arabic which permitted the casting of horoscopes, translated a work on the astrolabe and may even have cast horoscopes for members of the royal court. For this see Burnett (ed.), *Adelard*, pp. 147–60 and esp. pp. 160–1. For Adelard's relationship with a circle of scholars including Robert Losinga, bishop of Hereford and Walcher, prior of Malvern, see Burnett (ed.), *Adelard*, pp. 11–13; Cochrane, *Adelard*, p. 7.

¹⁸³ WM, GR, II, p. 153.

eleventh- and twelfth-century copies of the Alhandrean collection and the *Mathesis* in their monastic libraries, both of which have Fleurian affinities. For William, Fleury may have appeared the epicentre of astrological knowledge.

William's careful balancing of the harmful and dangerous aspects of this new learning is also explained by his great respect for a number of its English practitioners. Walcher, prior of Malvern, was deeply interested in Arabic learning, and astrology in particular, but, for all his skill with the astrolabe, was still in William's eyes a 'very reverend man' whose words were always to be trusted. William was also generally upbeat in his assessment of Robert Losinga, bishop of Hereford (d. 1095), who was similarly famed as an astrologer.¹⁸⁴ Much might lie therefore behind that reference to knowledge which was salutary. William was sensitive to the problem of the learned man whose name was blackened by charges of demonic conspiracy and appreciated that some of his readers might reject his tale of Sylvester as 'a popular fiction' because 'public opinion often wounds the reputation of learned men, maintaining that one whom they have seen excel in some department converses with the devil'.¹⁸⁵ And William dutifully explored the possibility that Sylvester's knowledge was purely God given, suggesting that Solomon had been gifted knowledge of like kind. But William did not want to push this point, arguing that God 'could have given Sylvester this power' but 'I do not say he did so'.¹⁸⁶ For William, the argument that demonic rather than divine agency lay behind Sylvester's special learning was clinched by the gruesome manner of the pope's death and his frantic deathbed search for forgiveness.

So the quest for knowledge could be dangerous, even soul-imperilling, but where exactly did the line between 'salutary' and 'harmful' knowledge lie? How was it to be determined? For William, matters of healthy inquiry were the traditional subjects of the schools (arithmetic, music, astronomy and geometry) while the dark arts which William chose not to enumerate, or simply did not know enough about to list, were locked up in the pages of secret books owned originally by skilled Jews and Saracens. Indeed, William seems to have pinned many of his suspicions down to certain mysterious and dangerous books which were now circulating among the religious. This seems to have been one way in which he

¹⁸⁴ WM, GP, p. 300. Geoffrey of Winchester noted on Robert's death that his mathematical learning and skill with the astrolabe had availed him little on this occasion, a remark which might shed light on a cryptic observation in an obituary comment by William who claimed that Robert 'relied on his wits to make his way in the world but he had not been corrupted by the world's temptations'. See William of Malmesbury, *Saints' Lives*, pp. 144–5. See also Burnett, 'Mathematics and Astronomy', p. 51. For Walcher and his knowledge of the astrolabe see Southern, *Robert Grosseteste*, p. 102; Southern, *Medieval Humanism*, pp. 168–71.

¹⁸⁵ WM, GR, I, pp. 282–3. ¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 288–9.

imagined a line might be drawn between licit and illicit. Initially, he singled out the *Mathesis* of Julius Firmicus as fraught with danger, visiting a special condemnation on Archbishop Gerard of York in his *Gesta Pontificum* because a copy of the *Mathesis* had been found beneath the prelate's pillow after his death.¹⁸⁷ The subject of this work certainly had a bad press and was bound up in the minds of many twelfth-century writers with necromantic efforts to divine the future. John of Salisbury even argued that 'the will of God is the first cause of all things and *mathesis* is the way of damnation'.¹⁸⁸ But there was a final twist here. William was prepared to reconsider his view of Gerard's bedtime reading – seemingly in the light of his own experience. The work of Julius Firmicus may have been anathema to him when he first wrote the *Gesta* but he later revisited the folio and excised the passage. Exactly what impelled him to make this revision is obscure, but it does seem, as Rodney Thomson has suggested, that between making the entry and altering it he may actually have read the *Mathesis* and satisfied himself that it did not transmit the 'harmful' knowledge which he so feared.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, such a supposition is strengthened by the appearance of an excerpt from the text in William's own *Polyhistor*.¹⁹⁰

The moral here, clichéd though it may be, is that the half-understood or unknown features of the new Arabic *scientia* did most to excite the fears of men like William. He retained that Augustinian suspicion of worldly knowledge and this could only have been sharpened by the Islamic associations of so much of the astrology and mathematics which was spreading through many of the surrounding Benedictine houses. Yet experience of the new learning could demystify it and soften William's view. What was initially novel, shadowy and threatening could be assimilated and normalised once William had grasped it. Once William had done this, danger could not be so confidently traced to particular identifiable books. Rather it inhered more exclusively in the way that a scholar tried to apply new knowledge and the extent to which he allowed it to blot out the truths of the faith and thought for the soul. And Sylvester II, or Gerbert as he was when he engaged in his supposed Toledan studies, was the archetype of the learned churchman who twisted his knowledge of sacred and temporal things to gratify worldly desires. In holding

¹⁸⁷ WM, *GP*, pp. 259–60 and p. 259 n. 6. On Julius Firmicus see Kieckhefer, *Magic*, p. 119; Wedel, *Astrology*, pp. 31–2. This text along with Chalcidius and Macrobius were certainly circulating at Chartres.

¹⁸⁸ JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 102. ¹⁸⁹ Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, p. 59.

¹⁹⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Polyhistor Deflorationum*, ed. H. Testroet Ouellette (Binghampton, NY, 1982), p. 104.

stereotypes of the necromancer before the scholar, the church was able to warn against a new configuration of dangers.

CONCLUSION

Twelfth-century religious culture was saturated with messages about the potency of holy things. As we saw in chapter 3, sacred gestures, utterances, objects and substances resonated with a special power which, for many, was intrinsic. The prevalence of this idea entailed a danger that the efficacy of these things might be conceived in narrowly mechanistic terms. And this, especially for churchmen framing normative texts and watchful about abuse of the holy, contained an added risk: that sacred things might be so malleable in their uses that they could be appropriated for unchristian purposes. This fear, of the instrumentalisation of the holy to the point of moral danger, ensured that a primary characteristic of much dangerous magic as it was imagined in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was that it involved misuse of Christian things. From font water to eucharistic wafer, altar cloth to crucifix, exorcism formula to the liturgy of the mass itself, all, it was thought, might be used compulsively for immoral ends. ‘Magic’, used here as a condemnatory label, was a way to mark out limits for the acceptable uses of the holy.

Twelfth-century culture was also, as we have seen, thoroughly imbriated with traditions of divination, prophecy and manipulation of properties of stones, herbs and substances which were rich in extra-ecclesial content. Such practices could, and did, attract the condemnation of churchmen when they were thought overtly to tempt God or solicit demonic intervention, but they were in many cases tolerated. The traditional teachings of the church, indeed the messages of scripture itself, were not consistent enough in these areas to allow blanket anathemas even if suppression had been practicable. And, of course, it was not practicable. Divination, prophecy and the knowledge of natural properties held widespread appeal – and to learned churchmen as well as the unlearned laity – proving powerfully attractive because they promised aid to the faithful in a world fraught with danger. But, as we have seen, this pattern of accommodation was disturbed in the twelfth century. The advent of new learning offered scholarly reinforcement to old instincts that knowledge of the future was both possible and desirable and that the secret properties of things might be divined and turned to human advantage. Naturalising discourses helped to explain and justify belief in occult virtues such that some ‘magic’ was, albeit in select circles, coming to be naturalised and thus rendered morally acceptable. More potently, the spread of astrological learning grounded the ancient idea that the heavens

disclosed the future in a technical art which promised to decipher their messages. If trapped in the academy, such trends of thought would have been limited in their destabilising effects. But these ideas, especially astrological ideas, were not so confined: they escaped into more general circulation, making those who had mastered them useful in the wider world. It was this appeal which made astrology in particular seem dangerous to some churchmen who feared both the means by which knowledge was derived from the heavens and the uses to which it might be put.

Representations of necromancy in our chronicles need to be understood in this context. That stereotype of the necromancer formed at the intersection of clerical fears about the intolerable extremes of three particular tendencies of thought that this chapter has mapped. The first cause of alarm – that holy things might be turned to unchristian ends – was old and arose from apprehension that Christian teachings about the sacred had become twisted in the thought of some believers such that its power was not understood in a moral framework. The second was new, inspired by the advent of secret, but seemingly potent, learning associated with the Muslim or Jewish worlds. This, it seems, was the particular stimulus for the idea that the necromancer sought knowledge of the future as so much of this exotic learning was of astrological bent. Yet the third cause of alarm, which formed the context for the other two, was almost timeless. This was the ancient Christian worry that the quest for worldly knowledge, power or glory might shut out thought for the soul. We met the same essential fear in chapter 3. There it resonated in a different way, triggered by the potential of worldly, wonder-working possibilities of holy things to eclipse their significance for the health of the soul. Exactly how the needs of body and soul were to be reconciled, especially by a church increasingly concerned to reach out to, and regulate, the devotional life of the parishes, is the subject of the [next chapter](#).

Chapter 5

IMAGINING THE DEAD

The thirteenth century witnessed a major effort by the church to strengthen universal values within local religious cultures and, through them, to reinforce in parochial religion common practices designed to prepare the soul for the next world. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 marks a significant staging-post in this process and in England transformed an existing trickle of diocesan legislation into a flood. Synodal statutes produced for the majority of dioceses indicate the development of programmes of basic religious instruction for the laity and elaborated sacramental obligations laid on all parishioners. The outward forms of this pastoral transformation are well known.¹ Priests were required to instruct parishioners more closely in the faith, regular preaching became an expectation and parishioners were compelled to make confession and take communion at least on an annual basis. But if the new religious discipline was to take root in the localities it needed to be underpinned by a practical theology which priests might preach and parishioners might be willing to accept. We are not, in other words, dealing with simple imposition here but the creation of systems of belief and praxis which could be promoted effectively in the parishes. Central to this development was the effective negotiation of the needs of body and soul in a system of practice which placed salvation within the grasp of ordinary believers, obliged as they were to struggle through life in a sinful world.

Schoolmen, particularly those working in Paris, would ultimately achieve this synthesis in a new moral theology worked out in the final quarter of the twelfth century but their ideas were the product of a hundred years or more of intellectual activity in cloister and school room.² They had roots in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, a period

¹ For a summary see Brown, *Church and Society*, pp. 38–49.

² See J. W. Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants: the Social Views of Peter Chanter and his Circle*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1970).

which saw a deepening sense of human sinfulness (reflected in increasingly ascetic religious orders) and a growing sensation that the resources for dealing with sin were limited. Only a small number could, or wished to, make the radical move of taking the cowl and, for those remaining in the world, sin was so pervasive and penances so arduous that few could hope to complete them.³ The alarm this generated, as we know, gave rise to practical solutions in forms of vicarious or 'super' satisfaction. Monastic benefaction allowed sinners to substitute for their own penances those of monks who effectively led the penitent life in their stead. Crusading owed at least some of its appeal to the conviction that it concentrated all of the amendment needed into a single especially arduous and indulgenced penitential undertaking.⁴

Yet others within the church were encouraged to tackle the theological problem of sin in a different way which abandoned the attempt to make full satisfaction for sin on earth. This move was driven by a growing sense that no act, however onerous, could ultimately suffice to atone for sins committed. Abelard and his heirs looked elsewhere for the keys to forgiveness and began to conceptualise penance in a new way, shifting emphasis from atonement achieved through arduous acts to redemption through inner contrition.⁵ This idea would become the intellectual heart of a new practical penitential theology designed for general use in the church. It would also put hope of salvation within the grasp of the ordinary sinner, as even the gravest sins eventually came to be thought redeemable through contrition.⁶ But the new thinking also left a significant question begging. God in his mercy might forgive the contrite sinner, but his justice demanded that they still settle their debts. Where was this to happen? The obvious effect was to shift more of the business of settlement into the afterlife. It had long been anticipated that penances might 'spill over' into the hereafter if left incomplete on earth but now the otherworld was becoming a standard place of expiation for sins forgiven

³ On church teaching about sin and the lay response see H. E. J. Cowdrey, *Gregory VII* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 510–13; also see M. Bull, *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade: the Limousin and Gascony c. 970–1130* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 166–7.

⁴ On such developments in penitential theology see H. E. J. Cowdrey, *The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 121–8; Le Goff, *Purgatory*, pp. 213–18. For penance in a crusading context see J. S. C. Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: a Short History* (London, 1987), pp. 9–17.

⁵ Some of the formative early contributions on this subject are B. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (London, 1964); C. Vogel, *Le Pêcheur et la pénitence au moyen âge* (Paris, 1969); and for a thorough recent discussion see S. Hamilton, *The Practice of Penance, 900–1050* (Woodbridge, 2001); S. Hamilton, 'The Unique Favour of Penance: the Church and the People', in P. Linehan and J. L. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), pp. 229–45. For developments in the schools see Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants*, 1, pp. 47–59.

⁶ See B. P. McGuire, 'Purgatory and the Communion of Saints: a Medieval Change', *Viator* 20 (1989), 61–84 at p. 82.

through contrition and confession. This forced theologians to work out the fate of souls in the afterlife more precisely and, in particular, to explore how and where post-mortem satisfaction for sin took place. This ultimately, as we shall see, helped to drive the emergence of purgatory as a more sharply defined space in which the burning up of sin's residues occurred.⁷

THE RISE OF PURGATORY

The idea that souls might discharge temporal debts for sin in purgatorial fire thus became ever more important but initially the time and place of purgation remained decidedly inchoate. Gratian, Hugh of St Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux were still writing vaguely of purgatorial 'places' through the first half of the twelfth century. Robert Pullen (d. ?1147) summed up the uncertainty: on being questioned about the fate of the penitent dead he was non-committal, acknowledging that they were 'in the purgatorial places' but conceding that the location of these was unknown to him.⁸ If we look to texts generated by monks, canons and seculars embedded in provincial communities rather than prominent schools, then representations of the fate of the dead become yet more varied and complex. Some writers situated purgation in the outer edges or upper reaches of hell. For others, those enduring temporary suffering occupied a kind of sulphurous mezzanine with only the irredeemably wicked condemned to go into the eternal fire.⁹ Others still thought that purgation might happen within the earth itself, in caves deep beneath the surface or perhaps in the fiery cracks of Mount Etna.¹⁰

⁷ These complex issues are sketched in Le Goff, *Purgatory*, pp. 130–254. For subsequent debate about whether purgatory was 'born' in the late twelfth century as Le Goff argued see G. R. Edwards, 'Purgatory: "birth" or "evolution"', *JEH*, 34 (1985), 634–46; R. W. Southern, 'Between Heaven and Hell', *Times Literary Supplement* (1982), 651–2. For ideas about the places of purgation in late Anglo-Saxon England see M. McGatch, 'Perceptions of Eternity', in M. Godden and M. Lapidge (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 190–205; A. Kabir, *Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Cambridge, 2001). For an alternative view of purgatory as a much later phenomenon see M. Vovelle, *La Mort et l'occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris, 1983), pp. 26–85.

⁸ F. Courtney, *Cardinal Robert Pullen: an English Theologian of the Twelfth Century* (Rome, 1954), pp. 275–6 and n. 48.

⁹ On this see also Bull, *Knightly Piety*, pp. 186–201; P. Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London, 1996), p. 211.

¹⁰ Gervase of Tilbury preserved this idea of the closeness of at least some of the dead in the early thirteenth century noting of a vision that 'as long as souls are in places of punishment which, as it were, verge and border on our world, by divine dispensation they appear to their relatives and friends', *GT*, pp. 588–91.

This tremendous diversity of views was born of the limited guidance which scripture offered about the fate of the soul between individual death and general resurrection and the consequent proliferation of apocryphal, patristic and early medieval writing which tried to fill the gap. Only slowly during the central middle ages would theologians (as part of a more general drive to reconfigure and systematise normative belief) resolve some clarity from the confusion. An added complexity here was that change was not driven in any simple way from above. This in itself may help to explain the slowness with which official definition proceeded. The church was still fumbling its way through the thirteenth century to integrate purgatory into its theology of the Last Things long after the idea had taken off among many of its teachers and preachers.¹¹

Although these developments were complex, a general direction of drift can be detected in texts beneath the level of high theological speculation. These dealt with the practical problems of doing sufficient penance in the world, deepening anxiety that no amount of penance would ever be fully satisfactory and, most importantly, suggested that the business of amendment was pushed increasingly on to the other side of the grave. Among such texts, visions and ghost stories offer especially rich insights. They might in some ways be obedient to rules of genre, stitching together commonplace motifs and topoi, but for all the elements of literary conventionality, they still reveal subtle but significant shifts in thought about the afterlife.

The first of these narratives that I want to examine is a hybrid vision and ghost story recorded by Orderic Vitalis.¹² He described how Walchelin, priest of Bonneval in the diocese of Lisieux, stumbled into the fabled company known as the *familia herlechini* while visiting a sick parishioner. Many things in the vision were familiar. As in older vision-narratives, Orderic was keen to stress that in the host Walchelin 'recognised among them many of his neighbours who had recently died, and heard them bewailing the torments they suffered because of their sins'.¹³ The warning of *memento mori* also rang clearly through the tale, as the visionary saw

¹¹ Le Goff, *Purgatory*, pp. 237–88; Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, pp. 279–91.

¹² An early examination of visions is E.J. Becker, *A Contribution to the Comparative Study of the Medieval Vision of Heaven and Hell* (Baltimore, 1899). Among important recent discussions are Kruger, *Dreaming*; Le Goff, *Medieval Imagination*, pp. 86–92, 232–42; P. Dinzelsbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1981); C. Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (Berkeley, 1976); D. D. R. Owen, *The Vision of Hell: Infernal Journeys in Medieval French Literature* (Edinburgh, 1970); C. Carozzi, 'La Géographie de l'au-delà et sa signification pendant le haut moyen âge', *Popoli e paesi nella cultura altomedievale*, *Settimane di Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, 29 (1983), pp. 423–81; C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford, 1987).

¹³ OV, iv, pp. 238–9.

among ranks of thieves, murderers, high-living women and low-dealing clergy many spaces for souls of those still alive. But this was more than a blend of evocative folklore and conventional morality because Orderic's ghosts are strikingly ambiguous.

Initially the message seems clear. The stress in the description of the grim array was on punishment for sin rather than purging. The colouring of the vision seemed hellish rather than purgatorial. One moment the dead are pleading for suffrages or for their misdeeds to be undone by the good offices of the living but the next they are swept away in the ceaseless commotion of the host and mockingly denied all help.¹⁴ The language of the narrative is contrived to create the same effect. Souls endure *intolerabiliter cruciari*, suffer *in tormentis* and are tortured (*crucio*) for their grave sins. At best, these seem to be the souls of the helpless dead punished for their unexpiated sins (perhaps until the Day of Judgement?) and in any event beyond the reach of earthly prayer. At worst, they might be the shades of the damned, disgorged from the depths of hell as a ghastly warning to the living. Indeed, Orderic has his visionary greet the host as an emanation from hell. William of Gloucester, one-time steward of William of Breteuil, appeared tormented by a blazing mill-shaft which he bore in his mouth as punishment for a pledge of a mill that he had unjustly retained.¹⁵ He asks Walchelin to have his kin undo the evil deed but he gets short shrift because, as the priest puts it, 'none of the faithful can carry a message of this kind'.¹⁶ The detail of Orderic's language lays bare what his visionary thought he was seeing here. We learn that William of Gloucester was a '*biotanus*', a category of spirit analysed by Alexander Murray who defined the word as 'a wicked unrepentant person, suddenly killed, who died unreconciled to the church'.¹⁷ This might, indeed, be a ghost from hell, and no deeds of the living could help it. The best the priest could do was to ward it off with the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹⁸

Yet this bleak view of the dead insinuated into the thoughts of the visionary was not one to which Orderic himself subscribed. He set out instead to challenge it by showing the redemptive possibilities open even to this sad array of souls. In an explanatory aside Orderic abandoned the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 238–9, 242–3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 244–5. On restitution see Le Goff, *Purgatory*, p. 315; Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law*, pp. 77–8.

¹⁶ OV, iv, pp. 244–5. The sense of the phrase 'and none of the faithful can carry a message of this kind (*et huiusmodi legatio nulli fidelium acceptabilis est*)' is slightly ambiguous and might be translated 'and none of the faithful would accept a message of this kind'.

¹⁷ OV, iv, pp. 246–7; Murray, *Suicide*, pp. 473–6.

¹⁸ For similar stories see Schmitt, *Ghosts*, pp. 105–15. Jean-Claude Schmitt suggests that the whirling penitential host had lost its function with the 'birth' of purgatory.

vocabulary of torment, torture and hellfire and replaced it with one of purgatorial fire (*purgatorio igne*) and cleansing.¹⁹ He showed that all that moved in the unearthly host was not necessarily hellish: its constituency was more mixed, and Orderic shattered narrow expectations about the fate of these souls. The denouement of the story sees the visionary's assumptions wholly subverted, the priest, having denied prayer to the shades of the dead, being forced to concede its value when confronted by the tormented soul of his own dead brother.

Mirroring this polemic for purgation over punishment was an attempt to stress a view of prayer consistent with Orderic's optimistic theology. The purgatorial understanding of the host advanced in Orderic's theological excursus carried with it an idea which would in the later middle ages be a commonplace: that suffrages moved the dead through their sufferings to a speedier salvation. This was Orderic's view too and it was encapsulated in the message Walchelin received from his brother at the end of the vision. And yet this message had an unusual stress. Walchelin's brother was to be freed from his torments within the year (*ab omnibus tormentis liberari*) and then would have hope of salvation, following in the footsteps of his father recently released into heaven. That Orderic felt the need to link liberation from torment and entry into heaven indicates that they were not synonymous yet. Others might still understand the efficacy of suffrages in different ways – perhaps as alleviating the pain of souls trapped in torment until the end of earthly time or freeing souls to await the end of time in some interim paradisiacal abode.²⁰

We can grasp some of these alternative perceptions of the otherworld if we explore a range of twelfth-century vision narratives. Here we find many which are far from stereotyped images of purgatorial punishment. One of them, the vision of Orm, describes how a thirteen-year-old boy from the parish of Howden had a vision of the next world in 1125. This text, dedicated to the monk Symeon of Durham, was written up in 1126 by Sigar, priest of the neighbouring parish of Newbald.²¹ Orm's otherworld was in some ways unremarkable: it comprised four places and four sorts of souls. The damned passed directly into the torments of hell (where

¹⁹ OV, iv, pp. 240–1.

²⁰ For Augustine's suggestion that suffrages might simply be palliative rather than working to speed souls through the purging fire see T. Matsuda, *Death and Purgatory in Middle English Didactic Poetry* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 8–10; also for further discussion of the idea of prayer bringing a more tolerable damnation see M. McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints: Prayer for the Dead in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 196, 202–5.

²¹ It was certainly written before 1130 (the year in which Symeon died). The dedication to Symeon is in part explained by the status of the parish in which Orm lived: Howden was a jurisdictional peculiar of Durham. See 'Vision of Orm', pp. 72–3.

demons, worms, rivers of ice and the gaping mouth of hell were all vividly depicted); the blessed went straight to heaven and resided among the saints. In between, there were souls in earthly paradise, richly dressed and joyful. Paradise was circumscribed by a wall, and beyond this were further souls who were less richly dressed. But perhaps the most important feature is what is missing from the vision: there is no mention of purgation or purgatorial fire. Hell (*Gehenna*) contained only the damned – *animas dampnatorum* – and it is clear that there was no time-limited punishment there. The middling groups were differentiated, but neither was undergoing any sort of purgation. In this very ‘static’ vision, souls were simply waiting. It seems clear what they were waiting for: the Last Judgement was a brooding presence in the narrative. St Michael, the weigher of souls, guided Orm through the next world and was shown holding a book of which two-thirds of the pages were turned (a symbol, it seems, of time past and to come). When Orm awoke, the priest even asked about the coming of Antichrist and the end of the world.²²

The vision of Orm is not an isolated case in which purgation is marginalised. Thomas of Monmouth described two not dissimilar visionary experiences among the miracles of St William of Norwich.²³ He related how a man who lived near Ely had been granted a vision of the next world as he lay sick. He found the otherworld to be sharply divided. The joys of heaven (where he saw Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary and, inevitably, little St William in pride of place among ‘thousands’ of other saints) were set against the torments of hell where he met many dead men and women whom he had once known. These suffering souls did not ask the visionary for prayers and masses but simply ‘entrusted him with certain familiar signs and tokens’ and ‘commissioning him to certain of their kindred who were still enjoying the light of life, assured these that the same torments were prepared for them, unless they should repent and desist from those crimes that they knew of’.²⁴ Again, we have a vision where there is no place for purging fires. Symeon of Durham tells stories which point the same way. Eadwulf, a man from the village of Ravensworth, received a vision in which he witnessed ‘many things

²² In many ways, the vision presents textually the kinds of images which covered the walls of twelfth- and thirteenth-century churches, conjuring figures of St Michael from the Doom, Christ on the Cross, the twelve apostles, Mary pleading for souls, the maw of hell. See Gurevich, *Popular Culture*, pp. 104–8; E. Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. D. Nussey (London, 1958), pp. 355–89, 438.

²³ For a discussion of similar material used in an effort to illuminate aristocratic piety see Bull, *Knightly Piety*, pp. 191–203.

²⁴ Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, pp. 67–74. There is also a similar vision of a little girl, *ibid.*, pp. 74–5.

concerning the blessedness of the just and the punishments of the damned', adding that some whom he had once known were now 'rejoicing in the flowery places' while for others still alive 'he foretold that eternal tortures and torments were prepared in hell'.²⁵ Symeon's better-known vision of Boso preserves a similar sharp distinction between 'places which were frightful and places which were pleasant'. The narrative omits any mention of purgation and stresses that the visionary, on returning to the body, confessed his sins and submitted himself to a harsh penitential regime.²⁶ Its imagery is not so much of processes as of events, the blessed (in this instance a procession of monks) being depicted passing through a great wall into a 'wide plain beautiful with the blooming of a marvellous variety of flowers'; the wicked (both English and Norman *milites*) vanishing like smoke before the seer's eyes or disappearing 'as if swallowed by a sudden opening of the earth'.²⁷

This tradition of vision-writing which made little of the purging fires seems to have been shaped by two powerful cultural influences. The heavy-handed imagery of Orm's vision offers us immediate clues about the first of these. Prominent in that imagery was the dominant pictorial representation of the Last Things which proliferated on church wall and chancel arch: the Doom. And behind that stood the defining eschatological text, Revelation's account of the apocalypse and Judgement General (which so preoccupied Orm's priestly interlocutor). Both offered up the same tidy separation of souls into saved and damned and have the same emphasis on two eventual destinations for the dead, heaven and hell, seen so clearly in these visions. But there was also a second factor shaping this narrative: an old-fashioned penitential theology. The stress here was on full amendment for sin on earth. Post-mortem purging in fire could only be incidental to the business of expiation, a burning-up of traces not a bonfire of substance. And it is striking in this connection that, while there might be a place for the laity in the heaven of Orm's vision, admission seems to turn on austerity on the part of the penitent that is imitative of the cloister. The author depicts the daughter of a local knight among the blessed but she had preserved her virginity heroically and preferred to die rather than to marry and thus earned her crown in the afterlife. Equally, the notion of suffraging the souls of the dead appears but it is inchoate and peripheral to the messages communicated in the narrative (the knight, for example, offered alms for the soul of his daughter each year but the girl

²⁵ Symeon, *Libellus*, pp. 212–14. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 246–51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 248–51. A similar picture is painted in Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of Modwenna*, pp. 46–7 where there is brittle distinction between the 'pains and horrible tortures of hell' and the 'flowery and pleasant' abodes of heaven.

had already attained heaven by her own merits and the alms were at best a thanks offering, at worst an irrelevance). Here the central point was that earthly austerities had the potential to obliterate the fullness of sin. Debts could be, and should be, discharged on earth rather than after death.

Orderic offers us a still clearer sense of the same dominating penitential preoccupations but thrown into sharper relief by his attempt to alter them. Early in his vision, we are confronted by a priest-slayer who was tortured on a limber for penance left incomplete. This torment was ambiguous. It might be simply punitive (the construction the horrified Walchelin was inclined to place on all he saw). But it might be more complicated. As we have already seen, Orderic glossed the text using a language of purgation. And yet even this discourse was still powerfully shaped by the deeply entrenched ideology of fully satisfactory penance and he continued to conceive of post-mortem expiation in essentially *penitential* terms. This torment of the priest-slayer was a 'spilling over' of penance which was now to be completed in more ghastly form in the half-life beyond death. Those dead who could be helped in the earth-bound whirling host were, in Orderic's eyes, engaged in a more dreadful extension of lifetime penitential discipline, held fast on the earth but burned by otherworldly fire. So Orderic's vision is a point on the curve of purgatory's evolution. It was composed in a world in which contrition and (if a priest was at hand) confession were necessary for salvation but were not naturally thought sufficient. Satisfaction for sin through penance was possible in this world and tangible efforts towards its achievement needed to be started in life. In this respect, Orderic and his peers in the early twelfth century remained in step with the austere theology of Augustine, who had depicted death-bed repentance, tainted perhaps with fear, desperation and despair, as too little too late.²⁸

The discussion thus far leaves one question open. How was prayer for the dead conceived in the theology of the Last Things implicit in visions like that of Orm? Orderic was, as we have seen, moving his readers and hearers into a world in which the benefits of prayers accumulated and so shortened progressively the time spent in the purging fires. But what of the more 'static' conceptions of the otherworld which Orderic was challenging? How was prayer conceived in these frameworks of belief? We already have one answer. Prayer might palliate pain and bring respite from torment. This idea is widespread in early visions and persists in

²⁸ Augustine's view, often juxtaposed against the faintly more optimistic assessment of Leo the Great, was preserved in canon law and theological writing of the twelfth century. See also William of Malmesbury's graphic depiction of the fate of witches and necromancers who left sorrow for their sins too late in WM, GR, I, pp. 294–5, 384–5.

the vision-writing of the later middle ages though now in a firmly subordinate role.²⁹ But prayer for the dead might also have more far-reaching effects even in the early texts. Megan McLaughlin's important work helps us here. She has cast doubt on the idea that patrons of monastic houses in the early and central middle ages were trying to accumulate 'units' of intercession and she rejects the notion that such spiritual benefits were calculated in the quantitative style beloved of the later middle ages. Rather she argues that prayer was sought because it was perceived to be 'associative', forging bonds between benefactor and prayer community and tying all into the corporate penitential activity of the cloister.³⁰ It seems likely that these bonds stretched even to the dead, suspended in the middle places during the interval between their individual death and Judgement General and yet still benefitting from the *bona* generated by the professionally penitent. Thus the load of sin was lightened against the Day of Judgement, as commemorative liturgies pulled the dead back and made them 'present' among the living. The Book of Life, which stood at the heart of these liturgies, represented the ultimate aspirations of the prayers: that those whose names were written in its leaves should, with the co-operation of divine grace and through their share in the *bona* of the community, stand among the saved on the Last Day.

So we can trace through these varied texts a number of assumptions shared by all of the early writers and also a point of divergence. First the shared element. We see that, though sorrow for sin might be needed, sorrow alone was not enough. Tangible action in this world was necessary in order to begin the painful business of amendment. This might be achieved through personal penances, close association with the religious or almsgiving. This need for something more than inner transformation is, of course, the context for the urgent gift-giving of aristocratic deathbeds depicted in numerous chronicle-narratives.³¹ Equally there was general agreement that penance begun in the world but incomplete at death spilled into the afterlife, possessing ramifications for the soul which might stop somewhere short of eternal damnation. But here is the point of bifurcation. For some writers, incomplete penance seems to have

²⁹ See GT, pp. 776–7.

³⁰ See McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, pp. 178–249; also P. J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 77–92; D. Iogna-Pratt, 'The Dead in the Celestial Book-Keeping of Cluniac Monks', in L. K. Little and B. H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 353–60; B. H. Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of St Peter: the Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909–1049* (Ithaca, 1989), esp. pp. 110–39.

³¹ See for example *Walden Book*, pp. 15–18; 76–7; 124–5; also, though not a chronicle account, the telling discussion of William Marshal's deathbed in 1219 in *The History of William Marshal*, eds. A. J. Holden, S. Gregory and D. Crouch, 2 vols., Anglo-Norman Texts Soc. (London, 2002–4), 1, pp. 425–63. For further discussion see Crouch, 'Troubled Deathbeds', pp. 24–36.

betokened detention until Judgement General in penal conditions which varied in their gravity according to the weight of sin carried into the afterlife. But, for others, such as Orderic, these middle spaces were conceptualised in more explicitly purgatorial terms, the souls of the dead expedited through the special fire by the suffrages of the living. The writers of the twelfth century were still caught between these two traditions but, as we shall see, the second was in the ascendant and the first in decline.

THE OTHERWORLD REINVENTED

If we roll forward to 1200 we see that the otherworld has changed. Purgatory (now formally known as such with the spreading use of the noun *purgatorium*) and its processes were becoming more familiar features in a more clearly drawn geography of the next world. New visions, such as the visions of the laymen Ailsi and Thurkill, were being composed in which purgatorial processes and places occupied a central place and the hosts of penitent dead had every expectation of intercessory prayer propelling them through the fires.³² Here a new image of the fate of souls was being advertised and contrition, confession, absolution and (token) penance were held up as the means to wash away guilt and save souls from hellfire.

In these texts the purgatorial places have also evolved: they have a sharper identity and are more thickly populated by the souls of ordinary parishioners. We are in a world where the 'reasonably penitent sinner' might hope for salvation and need not fear disqualification through lay vocation.³³ In heaven, Ailsi witnessed separate choirs of virgins, widows, husbands and wives, of prelates and bishops, and also 'choirs of all orders, grades, sexes and ages'.³⁴ Hope as well as fear is to be found in this remade otherworld. This is symbolised by saints (rather than demons) presiding in the purgatorial places, but it is explained by the way in which living and dead parishioners are bound in an economy of intercessory prayer. Thurkill told all the parishioners 'about the state of their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters . . . and whether they were still detained in pains or in rest and explained by how many masses they could be liberated from the penal places'.³⁵ He also revealed how suffrages were

³² C. S. Watkins, 'Sin, Penance and Purgatory in the Anglo-Norman Realm: the Evidence of Visions and Ghost Stories', *Past and Present*, 175 (2002), 3–33.

³³ Southern, 'Between Heaven and Hell', pp. 681–2.

³⁴ Peter of Cornwall, 'The Vision of Ailsi', ed. and trans. R. Sharpe, *Comish Studies*, 13 (1985), 16–17.

³⁵ *Visio Thurkilli, ut Videtur, Radulpho de Coggeshall*, ed. P. G. Schmidt (Leipzig, 1978), pp. 16–17.

available to all, irrespective of means. Thus thirty masses were needed to release Thurkill's father, but the saints explained that twenty were remitted on the grounds of poverty.³⁶ In these visions confession opened up the chance of salvation and sin itself became measurable, containable, capable of redress through readily intelligible expiatory strategies.

None, or almost none, of the individual elements in the reinvented otherworld were wholly new. A search for antecedents of almost any component one wishes to nominate will throw them up in earlier writings. Shifts are, for the most part, of emphasis and in the relations between the different elements of the eschatological system. The key to understanding this lies in something only half-seen in the visions and yet which changes decisively: penance. The idea that full satisfaction for sin could be made in the world is swept away in the later vision narratives. In its place arose the conviction that heartfelt contrition (expressed most effectually in confession) dissolved the guilt which dragged souls down to hell but fell far short of extinguishing all of the temporal debt incurred as a result of sin. This change meant that the fires of the middle places might do a great deal more than purge the residues of penance left incomplete at the point of death. And their importance was further magnified by the belief that even the gravest sins, once confessed, might be purged on the other side of the grave. This had linguistic ramifications because it sharpened the precision with which language was used. Because no act of penance could ever be 'fully satisfactory', purgatorial fire acquired a wholly different nature, as it consumed in its flames consequences of sin which no earthly expiation could remove. We saw earlier that Orderic's articulation of an innovative theology was caught up in a conservative language which continued to dominate thinking about sin. But this mode of expression was proving impossible to sustain in the later twelfth century as the process of purgation could no longer be figured in penitential terms. A new discourse was needed.

Shifts in penitential theology had geographical as well as linguistic implications. As the otherworldly process of purgation acquired an identity which was ever more sharply distinguished from earthly penance, so it made less and less sense for the churchmen engaged in the business of instruction to situate the process on earth. There were powerful pedagogical imperatives to dramatise the qualitative difference between penance and purgation by locating the latter in a place which was decisively separated from the world. And there were equally good reasons not to situate purgation in hell as so many early medieval vision-writers had

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

done. In the new moral theology of the later twelfth century, contrition was the per lucidly clear criterion which distinguished the sinful but penitent from the utterly unregenerate. And so it made didactic sense to make Hell the destination for the latter group (locking its gates forever against them) while purgatory was needed as a special receptacle for the former.

Purgatory's rise was thus one element in a larger theological reconfiguration, its emergence as a distinct and clearly labelled geographical space being driven by interacting linguistic, theological and didactic imperatives. Purgatory helped to make possible the dissemination of new thinking about the fate of the dead and was a colourful means of communicating ideas about sin and redemption. Behind it lurked a practical theology which was 'practical' in two senses. First, it had been fashioned by the men of the schools, perhaps most prominently Peter Chanter and his acolytes, as a means by which the ordinary faithful could lead their lives within a valued religious shape defined especially by the eucharist and penance. Secondly, it was capable of being boiled down into forms which ordinary priests could assimilate and their parishioners might accept. Once disseminated in the localities, it would enable all of the faithful of good intentions to help themselves out of their sins. Similarly, it set out ways in which they could provide for their souls and could be aided by living members of the parish community. Prayers, alms, votive lights and masses supplied inexpensive and powerful ways to save suffering souls in the middle place.

But to map the impact of these new teachings on the ways in which the dead were imagined in the localities we shall need to expand our search. One place where we might expect to find changes in belief powerfully reflected is in assumptions about, and attitudes towards, those who came back from beyond the grave. Who returned? From where? For what purposes? How did the living respond? And, though many of these 'ghost stories' were explicitly didactic, historical writings preserve many others which are far less refined. These narratives deal not with ghosts in the classic sense of the discarnate spirit (more frequently found in sermon and *exemplum*) but with the kinds of revenants, haunting in the flesh, which we met first in chapter 2. For all their uncanny qualities, these restless corpses were partly trapped in the larger transformations of thinking about sin, penance and purgatory that we have just described. Ghosts can offer us many answers. It is time to summon them up again.

DEMONISING THE RESTLESS DEAD

As in Orderic's vision of the wild hunt, a powerful impulse in the ghost stories of the chronicles was to explain the undeadness of corpses by

demonising them. The body might become the plaything of demons as a visible sign that a soul had been lost. Many stories about revenants implied this but some spelled it out. One contained in the *Miracles of St Modwenna* described how two peasants were struck dead by the saint after fleeing her monastery at Burton-upon-Trent. They wandered in their own dead flesh through the local village of Drakelowe and then started to roam the countryside, holding their own coffins aloft. They were ultimately dispatched by excavation, decapitation and burning of the hearts which, in the midst of the flames, cracked open and yielded up, in the form of a crow, the evil spirit (*malignum spiritum*) which had animated them.³⁷ In a later account, the *Lanercost* chronicler was similarly clear about a revenant which rose from the grave, near Paisley in western Scotland. The creature wandered abroad in the black habit of the Benedictine order which it had dishonoured by a wicked life, attacked the living and terrorised communities 'by a hidden judgement of God'. The chronicler noted that, 'if it be true that a demon has no power over anybody except one who leads the life of a hog, it is easy to understand why that man came to his end'.³⁸ In many other stories the chronicler did not discuss the standing of the revenant directly but offered oblique indications of it. Rituals and countermeasures frequently bore the hallmarks of exorcism, with many ghosts being laid with the cross or sprinklings of holy water.

There was little that was intrinsically problematic in the idea that demons might under certain circumstances possess bodies of the dead. The idea lived on in the *exempla*-collections of the thirteenth century and was used by Caesarius of Heisterbach as a moralising device. He told with no apparent uneasiness how, after a usurer of Pechen died, 'a devil moved her arms and legs as though she were counting money' and a priest had to be fetched to exorcise the corpse by wrapping it in his stole and administering holy water.³⁹ He also described a dead prince whose body was animated for a year by a devil, a knight named Everard who rose from his bier by demonic contrivance (obliging a terrified friend to bind up and speedily bury the corpse), and a clergyman whose body was preserved preternaturally for a time by an evil angel which had colonised it.⁴⁰ In each of these cases, in chronicles and *exempla*, the idea seems to be that evil spirits entered the flesh after death and maintained it in a gruesome state of preservation for their own nefarious ends.

There was also another and rather different way in which the restless dead might be demonised. Perhaps the best example of this is a story we

³⁷ Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of Modwenna*, pp. 196–7. ³⁸ *Lanercost Chronicle*, pp. 163–4.

³⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, II, pp. 300–1. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 324, 318.

have already met: the famous tale of the witch of Berkeley.⁴¹ As in the revenant-stories, the hallowed earth spat out the witch's corrupt body and it became the property of the evil angels she had served. But in other respects this tale was distinctive. This was not a lifeless cadaver given up as a plaything for demons, but a person recreated through the reunion of body and soul so that she might suffer punishment in the flesh as well as in the spirit.⁴² The story was unusual but was corroborated by vaguely similar accounts of preternatural resuscitation which William recited and, more generally, by the materialist theology and imagery of Judgement in which bodies and souls would be conjoined at the Last to experience the fullness of their desserts. The witch was recreated early in a 'premature resurrection' presided over by the Devil, but permitted by God, who offered it as a warning.⁴³ The 'pitiable cries for assistance' left hanging in the air as the witch was swept off to hell reminded all who heard the tale of the fleshly and spiritual terrors awaiting the wicked at the end of days.⁴⁴

William of Malmesbury was not an isolated exponent of this moralising vision of the wicked dead reanimating their own bodies. *Exempla*-writers still preserved versions of it in the thirteenth century. Even beyond the point when hell's gates were (in theory) locked, confining the damned perpetually within, Jacques de Vitry was still painting a picture of a damned usurer who rose from the grave and attacked the living with a candlestick.⁴⁵ The ghost said that a monastic burial and elaborate funeral liturgies enacted for him were of no use because his soul was lost. Caesarius also included among his many ghost stories some in which the ghost was damned, appearing wretched in fire or encased in its own corpse and wreaking havoc among the living.⁴⁶ But

⁴¹ See above, pp. 117–18.

⁴² William also tells another story of someone being swept straight to hell, body and soul, though this time before death. He told how a murderer was swallowed ('while still alive and wide awake') when the earth opened up in WM, GP, p. 319.

⁴³ On ideas of bodily resurrection see Bynum, *Resurrection*, pp. 115–225; M. Frassetto, 'Resurrection of the Body: Eleventh-Century Evidence from the Sermons of Ademar of Chabannes', *Journal of Religious History*, 26 (2002), 235–49.

⁴⁴ William, perhaps nervous about the story, associated it with others in texts he judged authoritative. He noted that Gregory the Great 'tells in his fourth book of a wicked wretch who was buried in a church, and cast out of doors by demons'. He also noted the story of Charles Martel who 'as he had dismembered the estates of almost every monastery in Gaul to pay his troops, was snatched from his grave before men's eyes by evil spirits, and from that day to this has never been seen again'. See WM, GR, pp. 379–81.

⁴⁵ Jacques de Vitry, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. T. F. Crane, Folklore Soc. (London, 1890), pp. 74–5.

⁴⁶ Although most of the stories told by Caesarius were about the dead from purgatory – who begged for masses, prayers and alms – a significant minority of ghosts still came from hell. See *Dialogus Miraculorum*, I, pp. 67–9, 83–4. Caesarius also reported a number of other cases of the damned returning to reveal their condition to the living, *ibid.*, pp. 67–9, 83–4, II, pp. 317, 330–5.

Imagining the dead

the interesting point is that thirteenth-century *exempla*-compilers saw such furious spirits as very much the exception. The great majority of their ghosts returned to seek prayers and masses and alms to speed them through the fires of purgatory. Many twelfth-century chroniclers, in contrast, were working with different assumptions. For them, seizure by demons or wicked souls restored to their own monstrous bodies proved the rule in trying to explain ghosts.

RETHINKING REVENANTS

Just as we found in the vision narratives, we can detect in the ghost stories of the chronicles an intensifying desire to reinterpret the returning dead as souls in need of aid. As a result, the revenant would be reinvented, as it was integrated into a moral and theological framework in which hope of salvation rather than fear of damnation became the determining impulse. One story in William of Newburgh's sequence is a straw in the strengthening wind of theological and devotional change.⁴⁷ William recounted how a man from Buckinghamshire had died and been laid in the grave by his wife but 'on the following night, however, having entered the bed where his wife was resting, not only terrified her on waking but nearly crushed her by the insupportable weight of his body'.⁴⁸ On subsequent nights a watch was kept and the spectre was driven away. This led him to pester his brothers and eventually other people in the village, until every household had to maintain a vigil each night. This revenant, though a nuisance, was not harmful; it went about its normal business rather than being intent on the destruction of living men and women. In this it approaches the notion of revenants reanimated by their own spirits advanced by Nancy Caciola.⁴⁹ The hauntings prompted the alarmed local people to appeal to their archdeacon, who in turn put the case to Hugh of Avallon, bishop of Lincoln (1186–1200).⁵⁰ William notes his response:

The bishop, being amazed at this, held a plain discussion with his companions; and there were some who said that such things had happened before in England, and cited frequent examples to make clear that peace could not be restored to the people unless the body of this most miserable man was dug up and burnt.⁵¹

⁴⁷ WN, II, pp. 474–5. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

⁴⁹ Caciola, 'Wraiths and Revenants', pp. 3–45 esp. pp. 15–26.

⁵⁰ The archdeacon, we learn, was a man called Stephen and someone of that name served in the relevant archdeaconry from 1194–1203.

⁵¹ WN, II, p. 475.

The churchmen around Hugh seem to have taken a similar view to the parishioners and priests in other tales: that this creature was demonic and should be put to the torch. But Hugh took a different line:

This proceeding, however, seemed unseemly and unworthy to the bishop, who, shortly afterwards, addressed a letter of absolution, written with his own hand, to the archdeacon, in order that it might be demonstrated by inspection in what state the body of the man really was; and he commanded his tomb to be opened and, the letter having been placed on his breast, to be closed.⁵²

The bishop of Lincoln thought this revenant was walking by divine permission to seek aid from the living, specifically for absolution of its sins. This being given, the corpse 'was no longer seen to wander nor permitted to inflict trouble or terror on anyone'.⁵³ It is not clear here whether Hugh was absolving from sentence of excommunication or more generally from sin. (Later evidence might lead us to argue for the former but the latter was not without precedent either.⁵⁴) In any event, the key point here is the gap between the perspective of parishioners, priests and the diocesan clergy of Lincoln on the one hand and that of the bishop on the other. Where confusion, pessimism, alarm about the unquiet dead predominated, Hugh substituted a view in which revenants were integrated into a scheme for salvation more heavily infused with divine mercy.

A second case where the theology is clearer cut appears in Walter Map's *Courtier's Trifles* which includes a cluster of stories about revenants. Map recounted how 'a knight of Northumberland was seated alone in his house after dinner in summer about the tenth hour, and lo! his father, who had died long before, approached him clad in a foul and ragged shroud'.⁵⁵ The knight believed that the apparition was a devil and drove it

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Le Goff, *Purgatory*, pp. 61–95. Caesarius of Heisterbach suggested that souls could re-enter the body after death and perform some brief act of penance or restitution before dying for a second time, thus saving themselves from hellfire. See Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, II, p. 335.

⁵⁴ At the deathbed of Henry, the Young King, bishops were portrayed signing the absolution shortly after his death. See D. Crouch, 'The Culture of Death in the Anglo-Norman World', in C. Warren Hollister (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Political Culture and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Proceedings of the Borthard Conference on Anglo-Norman History 1995* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 157–80 at pp. 172–7. Herbert Thurston noted evidence of inscribed absolution crosses in graves in H. Thurston, 'Broucolaccas: a Study in Medieval Ghost Lore', *The Month*, 90 (1897), 502–20. See also for attempts at post-mortem absolution N. Vincent, 'Some Pardons' Tales: the Earliest English Indulgences', *TRHS*, 6th series, 12 (2002), 23–58 at p. 46 which suggests that the idea was circulating in the first half of the twelfth century. Given that rites for the burial of the dead also seem commonly to have involved the priest placing an absolution on the breast as he addressed the corpse, the implication may have been that the ghost was walking in order to secure the completion of proper obsequies.

⁵⁵ Map, pp. 206–7.

from the threshold, but then the ghost spoke, revealing his identity and entreating his son to fetch the priest. When he arrived, the revenant exclaimed, 'I am that wretch whom you long ago excommunicated unnamed, with many more, for unrighteous withholding of tithes; but the common prayers of the church and alms of the faithful have, by God's grace, so helped me that I am permitted to ask for absolution.'⁵⁶ The priest duly administered this and the ghost walked back to the grave. The tale served as a kind of exemplum but, in so doing, the revenant was redefined, walking not by demonic power but to seek aid from the living. Interestingly, although Map seemed unfazed by stories about demonic revenants, this story was a source of surprise, prompting him to comment: 'This new case has introduced a new subject of discussion into the books of divinity.'⁵⁷

Revenant stories suggest that new penitential and purgatorial teachings were circulating through late twelfth-century England, but were far from being generally accepted. So how are we to account for this divergence of view among churchmen, many of whom were rough contemporaries? Returning to Hugh and the Buckingham revenant, it is striking that the bishop's companions (presumably his household or the cathedral chapter) differed from their bishop, especially as we know a little about some of these men and many of them had been educated in Paris, the crucible of innovative purgatorial and penitential thought. But, if we look more closely at the chronology of these developments the divergence between them is less surprising. Peter Lombard had put new contritionist thought about penance into more widespread circulation in his *Sentences* during the 1150s, arguing that even grave sins could be purged after death in fire so long as the sinner was penitent and had signalled this through confession. Acceptance of this contritionist notion in what would become a standard primer inaugurated an important theological shift. But it was a slow one. Efforts to apply these insights in a practical fashion in the field of pastoral divinity only really got underway in Paris from the 1170s onwards.⁵⁸ Most of the Lincoln chapter had already passed through the Paris Schools by that time. In any case, most of them had been studying canon law, not theology, and, as Jacques Le Goff has noted, canon law was slow to absorb new theological ideas.⁵⁹ New theology might not have been easy to come by at Lincoln itself. Although it was known in England as a leading school, Lincoln's limitations are exposed by Hugh's

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* ⁵⁷ *Ibid.* ⁵⁸ See Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants*, 1, pp. 43–55.

⁵⁹ See D. M. Smith, 'Hugh's Administration of the Diocese of Lincoln', in H. Mayr-Harting (ed.), *St Hugh of Lincoln: Lectures Delivered at Oxford and Lincoln to Celebrate the Eighth Centenary of St Hugh's Consecration as Bishop of Lincoln* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 19–47; Le Goff, *Purgatory*, pp. 146–8.

need to import learned men from elsewhere on his arrival as bishop.⁶⁰ Both the surviving twelfth-century books of its library and a twelfth-century book-list also suggest a conservative theological tinge.⁶¹ Peter Lombard's *Sentences* was there and so was Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, but there was no known copy of his *De Sacramentis*, an influential text of the 1170s in which new purgatorial and penitential thought was expressed in more succinct and practical form. The bishop's companions would probably not have met much novelty on these scores in their own diocese.

Hugh himself, who was known for his learning, must have been well acquainted with the thought of Peter Lombard, but questions still arise about what moved him to apply such new ideas in practical ways. He may have been motivated by ties to the Parisian schools whose moral outlook and pastoral inclinations he shared.⁶² A more economical explanation might be that his attitudes were formed within the Carthusian Order itself. In his *Meditations* Guy, first prior of the Grande Chartreuse, mused that 'if for whatever reason you lose the will to save one man, no matter whom, you cut off a limb from Christ's body.'⁶³ In moving from the role of monk to that of bishop, Hugh carried the Carthusian ethic with him from the cloister into the world. This is visible in his energetic preaching, ministry of the sacraments to the laity and, most germane to our purpose, the great care he took in the proper burial of the dead.⁶⁴ Hence he taught: 'the Kingdom of God is not confined only to monks, hermits and anchorites. When at the last the Lord shall judge each individual, he shall not hold it against him that he was not a monk or a hermit, but will reject each of the damned because he was not a real Christian.'⁶⁵

There is also one further piece of evidence for Hugh's thought which chimes with what we have already seen. If Herbert Thurston's analysis is to be believed, Hugh instructed Adam of Eynsham to set down in writing

⁶⁰ His first preoccupation here was to acquire men who could help him administer canon law but he was also interested in new theology and so introduced the Parisian scholar William de Montibus to Lincoln as chancellor. See AE, I, pp. 110–111; D. Owen (ed.), *A History of Lincoln Minster* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 125–9; H. MacKinnon, 'William de Montibus: a Medieval Teacher', in T. A. Sandquist and M. R. Powicke (eds.), *Essays in Medieval History Presented to Bertie Wilkinson* (Toronto, 1969), pp. 32–45; J. Goering, *William de Montibus (c. 1140–1213): the Schools and the Literature of Pastoral Care* (Toronto, 1992).

⁶¹ For the book-list see Gerald of Wales, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, VII, pp. 165–71.

⁶² For Hugh's contemporary standing as a scholar see RC, pp. 111–12.

⁶³ AE, II, p. 46; H. Leyser, 'Hugh the Carthusian', in H. Mayr-Harting (ed.), *Hugh of Lincoln: Lectures Delivered at Oxford and Lincoln to Celebrate the Eighth Centenary of St Hugh's Consecration as Bishop of Lincoln* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 1–18 at p. 17; Guigues Ier Prieur de Chartreuse, *Les Méditations*, Sources Chrétiennes 308 (Paris, 1983), p. 176.

⁶⁴ On his pastoral zeal see Gerald of Wales, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, VII, pp. 94–7; and on his concern that the dead be properly buried *ibid.*, pp. 98–9; 102–3; AE, II, p. 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.

in 1197 a vision experienced by an anonymous monk of Eynsham.⁶⁶ The texture of the resulting narrative is similar to that of the Carthusian meditations. It dwells at great length on the purgatorial places, is deeply engaged with the issue of suffrages for the dead and makes purgation central in the process of salvation.⁶⁷ The vision's most recent editor, Robert Easting, has noted that this text lets souls themselves speak.⁶⁸ They have identity and personality and are depicted being individually perfected in purgatorial fire rather than tortured in penal flames. In these respects the vision is very much of a piece with the pastoral ethics developed by Hugh during his episcopate and with his intellectual predisposition to interpret the prospects of salvation generously. It adds to the sense that the case of the Buckingham revenant might have been simply an extreme instance of Hugh practising what he had preached.

Our Augustinian chronicler, William of Newburgh, seems to have sympathised with the practical theology championed by Hugh. Not only was this consistent with the agenda of at least some within his own pastorally orientated order, it was also borne out by William's own cautious handling of the ghost stories.⁶⁹ In his first tale, he offered up Hugh's optimistic interpretation without demur. In his second and third stories, the matter of the narrative held a bleaker vision of the dead man's fate but William still fought shy of firm conclusions. He said that he did not know by what spirit (*nescio quo spiritu*) the dead walked and he carefully distanced himself from those interpreting the prematurely risen dead as being demonic. William noted that corpses were reanimated 'by the operation, *it is believed*, of Satan (*operatione, ut creditur, Sathanae*)' but his own belief remained veiled.⁷⁰ Only in the final story did he clearly indicate that a revenant was the possessed corpse of a damned man.⁷¹ And yet this was the exception which proved the general rule of William's moral theology: his position had shifted because this man had died, of his own volition, impenitent and unshriven, and this fact was known beyond dispute from the priest who had offered him the last rites and heard him refuse them.

If Bishop Hugh and William of Newburgh had absorbed more innovative pastoral theologies from their orders, Walter Map, who was a

⁶⁶ On Hugh's connections with Eynsham see AE, I, pp. ix–x. The date of the vision is also close to the likely date of the revenant stories which William of Newburgh incorporated into his chronicle (immediately prior to an account of famines which took place in 1196).

⁶⁷ Adam of Eynsham, *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham*, ed. R. Easting, Early English Text Soc. (2002).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. lxxxiii–xciii.

⁶⁹ On pastoral care and Augustinian spirituality see Bynum, *Docere Verbo et Exemplo*, pp. 9–98; J. Burton, 'Monasteries and Parish Churches in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Yorkshire', *Northern History*, 23 (1987), 39–50.

⁷⁰ WN, II, p. 476. My emphasis. ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 480–1.

canon of the Lincoln chapter from 1183 × 5, was soaked in older traditions. He learnt his theology at the feet of Gerard la Pucelle, who was primarily a canonist, in the Paris of the 1150s, and would not have met much doctrinal innovation there.⁷² He went on to serve the Cluniac Bishop Gilbert Foliot (whom he remembered warmly) and knew from him, as noted in *De Nugis*, that revenants were to be exorcised and decapitated.⁷³ The story of post-mortem absolution from sentence of excommunication might suggest a softening of traditionally hard theological lines under the influence of contritionist thought, but such notions came as something of a shock to Map.⁷⁴ Indeed that same theological conservatism sprang up more generally in *De Nugis*. When a monk *in extremis* made a deathbed confession to a layman, Map used the language of penance not purgation to describe how the dying man must 'abide in hell doing penance (*penitenciam*) until the Day of Judgement'.⁷⁵ Only through this would he, at the last, not 'with the wicked behold the face of indignation and wrath'. Here also we can detect an old-fashioned understanding of the hereafter shaped primarily by heavy penances and the Last Judgement, rather than ideas about contrition, purgation and the power of suffrages. It seems quite possible that Map, who had risen to become chancellor at Lincoln by c.1186, was exactly the kind of native churchman whom Hugh of Lincoln did not want presiding over his cathedral school. He shuffled him off in 1189 to be precentor, ultimately to make way for a new theological broom from the Parisian schools, William de Montibus.⁷⁶

So we find new ideas about sin, penance and purgation which would change the religious lives of parishioners, championed by the religious: a Carthusian, Augustinian canons and perhaps a Cistercian, if we accept that Ralph of Coggeshall was the author of the Vision of Thurkill.

⁷² We learn this in Gerald of Wales, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, I, p. 277. For Gerard la Pucelle see S. Kuttner and E. Rathbone, 'Anglo-Norman Canonists of the Twelfth Century', *Traditio*, 7 (1949–51), 279–358 at pp. 296–303.

⁷³ Map, pp. 36–7, 202–5.

⁷⁴ Elisabeth Vodola points out that 'it was evident by the early thirteenth century that major excommunication concerned only the punishment (*poena*) that detained a soul in purgatory and not the guilt (*culpa*) which consigned a soul to hell' in E. Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 45. But in practice the sentence was often interpreted more bleakly in the twelfth century investing it with greater terror. Symeon of Durham reported that, during the reign of Cnut, Bishop Edmund pronounced excommunications against those who diminished grants made by the king to St Cuthbert and 'by excommunicating them they consigned them to the company of those who on the Day of Judgement should go down into the eternal fire', Symeon, *Libellus*, pp. 166–9; also for another case, Symeon, *Libellus*, pp. 180–1. The possibility of post-mortem release from such a dreadful sentence might thus be very attractive indeed and there are early precedents for this. See for example the case from c.1160 in *Walden Book*, pp. 116–18.

⁷⁵ Map, pp. 344–5. ⁷⁶ Map, xvii–viii.

In contrast Map, the secular (and perhaps also the shadowy diocesan clergy gathered around Bishop Hugh) remained wedded to older traditions of penitential thought.

A similar contrast is to be found in two descriptions of St Patrick's Purgatory which were both composed in the 1180s. One was written in 1185 × 8 by Gerald of Wales (an archdeacon schooled in canon law at Paris) and the other in 1180 × 4 by the monk who wrote the *Vision of Owein* (a Cistercian).⁷⁷ Gerald was acquainted with the new penitential theology, an acquaintance visible in his didactic collection, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, which drew on Peter Lombard and Peter Chanter.⁷⁸ Yet we have already seen how theory and practice might part company with Gerald and he did not necessarily practice what he preached in the *Gemma*.⁷⁹ His hard-bitten pastoral ethics were grounded in older agendas. In Wales and the March, traditional canon law rather than new theology shaped Gerald's attitude as he struggled to improve clerical morals, end pervasive clerical marriage and cut the church free from lay proprietary interests.⁸⁰ His preoccupations, in this region far from central authority, in many respects belonged to an earlier age of reform and, in such a context, older and more daunting forms of penitential discipline might have proved a useful coercive tool. Gerald's reaction to rites performed at Lough Derg suggest as much. He spoke here not of purgatorial torments, as subsequent commentators did, but of an island filled with evil spirits. If a person chose to enter it he is 'seized immediately ... is crucified (*cruciat*) all night with such severe torments, and is so continuously afflicted with many unspeakable punishments of fire and water and other things that, when morning comes, scarcely the smallest trace of life is found in his poor body'.⁸¹ Gerald then explained that any who chose to enter it and undergo 'these torments (*tormenta*) because of a penance imposed on him ... will not have to endure the pains of hell, unless he commits some very serious sin'.

The Cistercian monk who wrote the *Vision of Owein* seems to have encountered similar stories about penitential rites, but framed his account very differently. Consistent with Gerald's tales, Owein entered the

⁷⁷ On the *Vision of Owein* see R. Easting, 'Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise in the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*', *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cisterciensis*, 37 (1986), 23–48; R. Easting, 'Owein at St Patrick's Purgatory', *Medium Aevum*, 40 (1986), 159–65; C. Zaleski, 'St Patrick's Purgatory: Pilgrimage Motifs in a Medieval Otherworld Vision', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46 (1985), 467–85.

⁷⁸ For an identification of Gerald's debts see *The Jewel of the Church: a translation of 'Gemma Ecclesiastica' by Giraldus Cambrensis* ed. and trans. J.J. Hagen (Leiden, 1979), pp. 38–41, 87–9, 294–5, 301.

⁷⁹ See above, pp. 100–2. ⁸⁰ See Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, pp. 29–45.

⁸¹ GW, IK, pp. 82–3.

purgatory to perform a kind of 'super-satisfactory' penance for the great many sins he had committed. But his assumptions were subverted on two counts as he wandered in the otherworld. First, Owein found that he made amendment for his sins not through the tearing, rending and burning of his flesh but rather through contrition achieved in co-operation with divine grace. By the simple expedient of trusting in Christ, he is shown putting the devils to flight time and again. And secondly, even as he strove to make satisfaction for his sins through vigorous expiatory acts, he was the odd man out in the remade otherworld of the vision, for everyone else was already dead and expiating their sins in purgatorial fire, speeded on by the prayers of the faithful.⁸² The puzzled presiding demons even spelt out the paradox, pointing out to the knight that 'the others who serve us do not come to us until after their deaths'.⁸³

Mary Mansfield's researches help to set Gerald's commitment to an older way of doing things in context. She has shown that, for all the growing emphasis on interiority and contrition in the new prescriptive sources of the late twelfth century, penitential *practice* often remained strikingly conservative.⁸⁴ Not only did attachment to public penances and 'humiliation' of sinners linger, but 'fully satisfactory' frameworks for understanding the penitential process also endured. Older ideas continued to enjoy considerable credibility even among some of the more progressive theologians. For example, both Alan of Lille and Robert of Flamborough still advocated harsh, fixed-tariff penances.⁸⁵ Wider dissemination of more flexible penances, in which intention was taken more fully into account, waited on the next generation of manuals for confessors which appeared in numbers only in the early thirteenth century.⁸⁶ Even then these ideas still took time to catch on. Robert de Sorbon claimed in the mid-thirteenth century that some parish priests were still demanding rigorous, fully satisfactory penances and were requiring seven years of penance for a deadly sin.⁸⁷ This might help in turn to explain the profusion of *exempla* in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which were designed to teach the efficacy of contrition and confession as acts which in themselves melted sin – a notion captured in vivid stories of

⁸² *Das Buch vom Espurgatoire S. Patrice der Marie de France und seine Quelle*, ed. K. Warnke (Halle, 1938), pp. 3–169.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸⁴ Mansfield, *Humiliation*, esp. pp. 288–98 for a summary of her conclusions.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66. She also observes that in Lateran IV *penitentia* was still used to mean the earthly punishment rather than the whole process of penance indicating a certain attachment to satisfactory penance even at this point.

⁸⁶ See Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants*, I, pp. 43–55. ⁸⁷ Mansfield, *Humiliation*, p. 31.

confessions blotting out the devil's memory of offences or erasing notes from books or parchment rolls in which sins had been enumerated.⁸⁸

So the religious culture of the late twelfth century was caught between two traditions. A new moral theology had been forged but the capacity to spread it in the world was restricted by the pastoral inclinations and theological training of those who would have undertaken the task of dissemination. In pastorally 'precocious' dioceses like Lincoln the impulse to evangelise about the importance of contrition, the prospect of purgatorial fire and the value of suffrages (surprisingly) did not come initially from the seculars. These were as yet little schooled in the practical pastoral divinity required. Rather it came at first direct from the cloister.⁸⁹ If at least some monastic spirits were willing to spread the word, the flesh and bones of pastoral structures were weak. Before 1215 preaching seems to have been a relatively infrequent event and the Latin learning of the parish clergy, and hence their ability to deliver new messages about sin and salvation, was limited.⁹⁰ More contentiously, Alexander Murray has suggested that regular lay confession was probably the exception rather than the rule before Lateran IV and hence the opportunities for catechesis were similarly restricted.⁹¹ So new ideas existed but had only limited chance to spread.

SIN AND SALVATION IN TWELFTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

So how can we integrate these insights about belief into our understanding of religious practice? Can we use them to help us illuminate the religion of the parishes? At the end of the twelfth century it seems likely that older ideas about sin continued to hold their ground in the localities. Shared rituals probably introduced elements of commonality into thought and would, in particular, have reinforced a sense that actions, rather than mere good intentions, were the key to washing away sins. These actions might entail individual or collective expiation, or might involve forging connections with professional penitents and intercessors. In either event, they rested on similar principles of transaction and

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36 and esp. ns 56–8.

⁸⁹ P. Biller, 'Confession in the Middle Ages: an Introduction', in P. Biller and A. J. Minnis (eds.), *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages* (York, 1998), pp. 3–33 at pp. 3–18; on the spread of the new moral theology see L. E. Boyle, 'The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology', in T. J. Heffernan (ed.), *The Popular Literature of Medieval England* (Knoxville, 1985), pp. 30–43.

⁹⁰ On preaching see Bartlett, *England*, pp. 451–4; Lawrence, 'English Parish Clergy', pp. 648–70.

⁹¹ A. Murray, 'Confession Before 1215', *TRHS*, 6th series, 3 (1993), 51–81. See also the recent dissenting view in Hamilton, *Penance*, p. 209.

exchange, ideas which dictated that account must be rendered for wrongs committed. This idea infused law-codes and old-style penitentials alike and its emphasis on externals ensured that churchmen and parishioners might identify the unregenerate with some confidence. This would also imply that those who had led a vicious life without visible amendment might be thought capable of rising from the grave by the contrivance of evil angels.

At first glance, this might suggest rather a bleak vision for ordinary parishioners caught in an Anselmian world of pervasive sinfulness, in which only the professionally religious had a strong chance of being saved. But, viewed from the bottom up rather than the top down, the perspective was probably different. Official rituals offered resources for dealing with sin for those wishing to grasp them. The liturgies of Lent and Easter, in particular, integrated powerful ideas of penitence into the experience of worship in local and cathedral churches and offered opportunities for collective and ritualised confrontation with sin. Sarah Hamilton, in challenging Murray's views about confession, has highlighted considerable evidence for penitential activity on Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday in many dioceses.⁹² Mary Mansfield has also suggested that, in northern France at least, public penance took place in most parishes at least once a year during the thirteenth century, most likely on Sundays and feast days, with sinners being sent to local shrines or to their mother church on a pilgrimage or being ritually barred from their own churches.⁹³ Such practices, which did not have their origins in reforms inaugurated by Lateran IV, are likely to have had a long prehistory. The value of penance could therefore have been familiar enough, even if regular confession was not itself an endemic feature of local religious culture.

But, if sensitivity to sin and the arduous means of its amendment was widespread, what additional resources existed for combating it? The twelfth-century aristocracy, as many studies of religious donation have demonstrated, set extensive monastic benefactions against the great weight of their misdeeds.⁹⁴ But how could merchants, the rural peasantry, the urban poor, hope to mitigate their offences through earthly acts? At first glance these people seem trapped by their earthly vocations. William

⁹² On Ash Wednesday/Maundy Thursday rituals see Hamilton, *Penance*, pp. 209–10. For a formal statement of penitential norms in the twelfth century see also Gilbert of Limerick, *Gille of Limerick*, p. 161. See also D. Crouch, 'The Troubled Deathbeds of Henry I's Servants: Death, Confession and Secular Conduct in the Twelfth Century', *Albion*, 34 (2002) 25–8.

⁹³ Mansfield, *Humiliation*, p. 130.

⁹⁴ E. Cownie, *Religious Patronage in Anglo-Norman England 1066–1135* (London, 1993), pp. 151–71; Burton, *Monastic Order*, pp. 193–5; Bull, *Knightly Piety*, pp. 157–66.

of Malmesbury paints a picture of a merchant called Senulf who repeatedly came to Wulfstan to confess the same sins. Wulfstan saw this as unacceptable and urged the man to leave the world and become a monk.⁹⁵ Senulf, like most laymen, was unwilling to embrace life-changing conversion to the cloistered life and hence was impaled on the horns of a similar dilemma to that of knights and nobles, but seemingly with fewer resources to secure vicarious penance. Yet Senulf's fate need not have been so bleak; there were resources upon which he could draw. First, cartularies and *libri vitae* offer some clues about how the burdens of sin might be lightened.⁹⁶ The unusually rich charter collection *Textus Roffensis* shows in great detail for Rochester Cathedral Priory what might have been true for other less well-documented institutions: that pious donations extended, in the form of tiny parcels of land, much further down the social hierarchy than one might initially anticipate.⁹⁷ Sharing in the vicarious penitential benefits of the cloister, in some localities at least, may not have been as socially exclusive as we might be led to think by less detailed monastic archives.

Secondly, there were additional resources in the emerging parishes, though their extent is often hard to discern in the dim light shed by our evidence. We can see that parish churches may have played a significant role. Lay communities were, as we have observed, often instrumental in the creation of these churches, and the act of endowment was itself a charitable deed which might benefit the soul. When William Berner of Harborough, Lincolnshire, gave two acres of land to the altar of St Katherine, the whole parish witnessed the donation.⁹⁸ For William, such an audience may have been desirable not simply for testimonial reasons but also to secure remembrance as a generous benefactor and hence prayer for his soul. Thus the local church might become a forum in which prayers were offered not only for the good of the living but for the souls of the dead. Gilbert of Limerick envisaged this, noting the priest's obligation to his parishioners to hear their deathbed confessions, bury

⁹⁵ WM, GP, pp. 286–7.

⁹⁶ For *libri vitae* and problems of interpretation see C. Clark, 'BL Additional MS 40,000 fols 1v–12r', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 7 (1985), 50–68; J. Barrow, 'The Canons and Citizens of Hereford, c.1160–1240', *Midland History*, 24 (1999), 1–23 at p. 12; J. S. Moore, 'Prosopographical Problems of English *Libri Vitae*', in K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (ed.), *Family Trees and the Roots of Politics: the Prosopography of Britain from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 165–88; Harper-Bill, 'Church and Society', pp. 203–12.

⁹⁷ Cownie, *Religious Patronage*, p. 168. See also H. Tsurushima, 'The Fraternity of Rochester Cathedral Priory about 1100', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 14 (1991), 313–37. But on the problems of identifying peasant benefactors see J. Wardrop, *Fountains Abbey and its Benefactors, 1132–1300* (Kalamazoo, 1987), pp. 216–232.

⁹⁸ Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England*, p. 108.

them and 'commend the souls of the faithful as they leave their bodies and celebrate their memory at Mass and in prayer'. He was also to 'advance to purification' those who had not done sufficient penance during life.⁹⁹ The local church was a place in which votive lights might be endowed on favoured altars and other donations might be offered for the good of the dead.¹⁰⁰ Such provision has left its impress on canon law. Where Gratian had been content that unfree peasants possessed no testamentary capacity, in the last quarter of the twelfth century canon lawyers took a different view, asserting that even serfs were entitled to dispose of some of their goods for the benefit of their immortal souls.¹⁰¹

Thirdly we might consider further the role of hermits in local religious practices. The holy man, widespread in twelfth-century England, may have provided one means for the ordinary faithful to receive spiritual counsel and also to bind themselves through donation to the kind of world-renouncing spirituality which wealthier men and women sought from the cloister. Peter Brown noted the many ways in which the holy man functioned as an allayer of guilt and a professional in matters of penance.¹⁰² Alan Thacker, writing about Anglo-Saxon hermits, has also pointed to holy men affording 'means of by-passing the demanding observances associated with ritual confession and penance'.¹⁰³ Twelfth-century holy men seem to have possessed similar competences. The especially well-documented Godric of Finchale is depicted by his hagiographer ministering not only to maladies of the body but also to afflictions of the soul. He was a frequent recipient of peasant donations and prescribed pilgrimages and penances as remedies for sin.¹⁰⁴ Such a role, coupled with the spreading fear of sin which historians have detected more generally in twelfth-century culture, might help to explain the very large numbers of hermits identified in A. K. Warren's study of medieval

⁹⁹ Gilbert of Limerick, *Gille of Limerick*, pp. 156–9. For guilds, which may also have supplied significant resources for suffraging souls in late Anglo-Saxon and central medieval England, see Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, pp. 68–76.

¹⁰⁰ Postles, 'Lamps, Lights and Layfolk', pp. 97–114.

¹⁰¹ Although the transformation was underway in the last quarter of the twelfth century, driven also by developments in civil law, the issue was still being forced by recalcitrant landlords in the second half of the thirteenth century and generated synodal legislation in consequence. See P. Hyams, *Kings, Lords and Peasants in Medieval England: the Common Law of Villeinage in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 70–4; M. M. Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England from the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 253–8.

¹⁰² P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), 80–101.

¹⁰³ Thacker, 'Monks, Preaching and Pastoral Care', pp. 137–70.

¹⁰⁴ See S. J. Ridyard, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse Revisited: Godric of Finchale', in Gameson and Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture*, pp. 236–50 at 240–1.

England.¹⁰⁵ It might also help to account for the tensions that sometimes developed between individual holy men and monastic communities, as the two, offering overlapping spiritual services, vied over clientele.¹⁰⁶

Fourthly, we might turn our gaze from living holy men to dead ones: the saints. Patrick Geary, in discussing the cult of saints in the early middle ages, has suggested that 'the miraculous rather than the penitential aspects of devotion to relics seem to have formed for centuries the basis of popular devotion to local and regional pilgrimage sites'.¹⁰⁷ But this judgement demands some qualification for it would be a mistake to decouple two aspects of devotion which were intimately connected. Cultures of donation and devotion to the shrines associated the poor and middling sort with these 'very special dead', binding them tightly to those whose salvation was assured and securing their intercession at the last.¹⁰⁸ Miracle collections might be dominated by the very visible workings of saintly powers such as healings and acts of vengeance but we must not allow these to dazzle us. The importance attached by devotees to the spiritual competences of saints is also reflected in these texts. Thomas of Monmouth tells us that, at St William's shrine in Norwich, not only the 'sick were healed' and 'those who come in sorrow went away in joy' but also 'the bound were loosed'.¹⁰⁹ William of Norwich is, for example, depicted on several occasions shortening punitive penances by shattering chains and breaking fetters.¹¹⁰ These showy claims about saintly power, made by an especially polemical hagiographer, promoted the power of this saint over sin, in expectation that his audience would be receptive to such messages.

In measuring the significance of these penitential aspects in the cult of saints we also need to be aware of an optical illusion in the evidence. When advertising a saint's powers, healings of the sick and thunderbolts of vengeance were valued highly by men like Thomas because they were visible and hence thought verifiable on the word of trusted witnesses. In the heaping up of miracles to prove saintly credentials, the salvific role of saints could be curiously neglected precisely because unseen healing of souls seldom met this need for visibility and verifiability: just as Christ

¹⁰⁵ A. K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (London, 1985).

¹⁰⁶ See Williams, *English and the Norman Conquest*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁷ Geary, *Living with the Dead*, p. 191. ¹⁰⁸ For the phrase see Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, pp. 3–20.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas of Monmouth, *William of Norwich*, p. 231.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 231–41, 279–83; also accounts of interventions in similar cases by St Edmund in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, 1, pp. 187–9, 204–7; and those of St Gilbert in *The Book of St Gilbert*, eds. R. Foreville and G. Keir, *Oxford Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 277–9. For examples of penitential pilgrimage see WM, *GP*, pp. 425–6; and for discussion Webb, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 35–61. On the issue of donations to shrines see Cownie, *Religious Patronage*, pp. 51, 174–5.

instructed the lame man to pick up his bed and walk, so too the saint was constrained to work worldly wonders in order to confirm his or her place in the heavenly pantheon.¹¹¹ Anecdotal evidence in other collections of miracles and narrative sources hints at this substantial, but submerged, salvific appeal of the cults. The miracles ascribed to St Modwenna include a number of instances where sinners sought the aid of the saint for the healing of their soul.¹¹² William of Malmesbury also dramatised the idea of saintly intercession for the ordinary sinner in his *Gesta Pontificum*. He recounted how a woman was seized by paralysis after illicitly spinning wool on Sundays.¹¹³ She fasted for the forty days of Lent, an act which 'diminished her pile of sins' and then the remaining debt was expunged by St Aldhelm who signalled forgiveness by healing her contracted body. These miracles would never constitute the bulk of collections but the demands of the genre mean that we should not expect this. Their scattered presence is sufficient to reveal this other, powerful role of the saint in local religious cultures.

Not only the range of miracle-working but also the means by which saintly help could be harnessed was more variegated than the miracle collections taken in isolation might suggest. In addition to individual petitions, there is ample evidence of communal strategies for expiating sin which turned not simply on confession and penance but on the invocation of powerful local saints through collective rituals. We have already met the account offered by Gerald of Wales in which sinners gathered at the shrine of St Eluned on her feast day to dance away their sins and be reconciled inside the church building by the priest. Such rites might represent the outer edges of innovation and yet the story illustrates how communities could absorb the church's teaching about sin, but confronted by daunting formal penances, generate their own strategies for dealing with it.¹¹⁴ Jocelin of Furness told similar stories of expiatory fasting on the slopes of Croagh Patrick in Ireland. He noted that those who kept the vigil believed that they would never thereafter 'enter the gates of hell', holding that they would win sufficient favour through St Patrick's merits to avoid this fate.¹¹⁵ Jocelin even added, again with

¹¹¹ For the exception of Guibert of Nogent (who paid little attention to the wonder-working aspects of cult) and the reasons for his exceptionalism see Yarrow, *Saints*, pp. 70–5.

¹¹² Geoffrey of Burton, *Life of St Modwenna*, pp. 33–7, 213; also for another example, pp. 39–43, 189–91, 219.

¹¹³ WM, *GP*, pp. 439–40.

¹¹⁴ Mary Mansfield claimed that 'although laymen could not understand the Latin of the liturgy, they could make sense of the Rogationtide circumambulations of the city or Palm Sunday blessings of boxwood and flowers', Mansfield, *Humiliation*, pp. 132–56.

¹¹⁵ Jocelin of Furness, *Vita Sancti Waldevi*, AASS 1st August, 1733, 248–76.

neither censure nor approbation, that some thought the rites purgative, the torments of the vigil ensuring that they were purged of their sins.¹¹⁶ Though these were observations about Irish practices they nevertheless illuminate Jocelin's openness to ritual innovation. Imperfections in pastoral structures, the limited resources offered by the church to help the laity 'handle sin' and its own inchoate theology of the fate of souls all created space in the twelfth century for local elaboration of expiatory practices and inclined churchmen to tolerate them.

Thus, through the creation of connections with cloistered monks, reclusive holy men or local saints, the ordinary faithful forged salvific strategies for themselves. Set in the context of a spirituality which emphasised the efficacy of ritual action, whether performed personally or vicariously, over mere good intention, in the alleviation of sin, these practices would die hard. They were hallowed by long use, rooted in local cultures and animated by an idea of making full satisfaction for sin in this world which probably appealed to intuition and instinct more naturally than did the new theology of intentions and token acts. Nonetheless the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as we have seen, witnessed the first stirrings of a church eager to remake the penitential landscape even if its resources for bringing this about were exiguous. We saw in chapter 3 that some churchmen were keen to stress the value of contrition and confession as a prelude to seeking the help of the saints. Thus they attempted to standardise and, in an indirect way, sacramentalise the relationship between pilgrim and saint. We can see an associated process of institutionalisation in the proliferation of indulgences attached to pilgrimages to shrines. Nick Vincent has revealed in an important article how religious houses were, during the twelfth century, eager to ensure that pilgrimages to their shrines were indulgenced.¹¹⁷ Bishops duly obliged. For example, Archbishop Hubert Walter and his suffragans promised 'remission from penance' for those making pilgrimages to St Gilbert at Sempringham and also 'a share in the prayers and all benefits which exist in all the churches of the whole of the order of Sempringham

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ I am grateful to Professor Vincent for suggesting the possible significance of indulgences in this context to me. In his article, he has argued for widespread demand for indulgences among the laity and suggests that by the end of the twelfth century 'there was probably no diocese in England where indulgences could not be found' in Vincent, 'Indulgences', p. 35. In 1215, the issuing of indulgences by bishops for those visiting shrines was limited by Lateran IV (canon 62) suggesting, as Diana Webb has pointed out, that 'granting of indulgences by bishops had become sufficiently popular to lead to excess'. See Webb, *Pilgrimage*, p. 66.

and in the church of Canterbury'.¹¹⁸ Such words illuminate not only the readiness of the ordinary faithful to handle sin by applying to the saints, but also the keenness of the church hierarchy to insinuate itself into that relationship between saint and devotee. The indulgence measured out and regulated the benefits accruing to ordinary pilgrims already enthused by the prospect of soul-saving grace flowing through the shrines. Existing devotions were being given a new shape and form by churchmen who wanted to supervise local piety more intensively and yet were constrained to work with its grain.¹¹⁹

CONCLUSION

New ways of imagining the fate of the dead evolved and spread slowly during the twelfth century and tracing their development is complicated because it is hard to identify genuine innovations. Even the 'purgatorial narrative' of the soul's journey through the otherworld was hardly new in the central middle ages; indeed versions of it were circulating throughout the early medieval period. So the issue here is not so much a quest for novelties. Rather we have to consider why that 'purgatorial' story ceased to be one among many and emerged instead as the dominant explanation of what happened to souls in the afterlife – a hegemonic position it would occupy throughout the later middle ages. Central to understanding this is the church's didactic project. As papal and diocesan hierarchies strove to standardise core beliefs in the parishes by implementing regular confession and communion, binding parishioners more tightly to their local churches and improving the education of the clergy, they also had to offer an account of salvation which all could grasp. A radical theological reorientation underpinned this development. Where Anselm had in c.1100 suggested that only monks, nuns and hermits had a strong chance of salvation by c.1200 Hugh of Lincoln held this goal ultimately to be within the reach of any penitent sinner. The new moral theology, which allowed and explained this optimism, privileged good intentions over pious actions and emphasised the sacramental means by which these

¹¹⁸ *Book of St Gilbert*, p. 195. Nor was this house alone: see also similar cases in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, 1, p. 91; *Feudal Documents from the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, ed. D. C. Douglas (London, 1932), p. 153. There were offers of indulgences at Lincoln which were linked to contributions to the fabric fund (which seems in turn to have evolved later into a Guild of Virgin Mary). See Owen (ed.), *History of Lincoln Minster*, pp. 121–2; also Barrow, 'Canons and Citizens', pp. 1–23; Vincent, 'Indulgences', p. 42.

¹¹⁹ It is also interesting that, as Vincent argues, the church seems to have been forced to accept a system which evolved in an *ad hoc* way even though the schoolmen were initially very hostile to the idea. Vincent, 'Indulgences', p. 52.

sentiments might be expressed and the grace they unlocked might be communicated. But there was a problem. Intellectually copper-bottomed and bearing the *imprimatur* of impressive Parisian masters it might be, but this was an abstruse and hard-to-grasp ideology for those outside the charmed circle of the schools. It would need to make headway against a wealth of existing disparate and localised strategies of expiation broadly united in their stress that penitential action spoke louder in heaven than good intentions. Driving the new ideology forward in the localities would be no easy task if the axioms of the moral theology on offer could not be explained in clear ways. To overcome the counter-intuitiveness of the new teaching, powerful didactic resources would be needed.

Here the rise of vivid and colourful visions and ghost stories would play their part. They formed a trickle in the chronicles of the twelfth century, as their authors themselves struggled with contritionist theology and theories of post-mortem expiation but they turned into a flood in the thirteenth, let loose in sermons and *exempla* which fed waves of mendicant and parochial preaching aimed at the re-evangelisation of the ordinary faithful. Purgatory 'rose' in this context as a way to explain how sin forgiven through contrition and confession during life could be burned away on the other side of the grave in a special fire in a dedicated place. Purgatory captured in vivid language and images how this process proceeded, co-opting ideas of rigorous amendment for sin with which the laity were familiar and translating them from this world into the next. By means of these vivid and evocative stories about the middle place and its inhabitants, constructed out of new theology, old motifs and even folklore, the church would try to resculpt assumptions about sin, satisfaction and the fate of souls which were deeply entrenched in the religious culture of the parishes.

THINKING WITH THE SUPERNATURAL

The [first chapter](#) of this book began by exploring the ways in which a range of authors conceptualised the supernatural order. This chapter returns to the thought of some of those authors in order to develop the preliminary ideas laid out there. Here, however, the central concern is different: it is with the ways in which the writers themselves responded to, and, in a loose sense, ‘used’, the frequently troublesome wonder stories that they told, especially those in which the supernatural was ambiguous and resistant to explanation.

The emotional power of wonders was a constant in the central middle ages, lying, as Caroline Bynum has observed, in rarity, an unexplained cause and the inescapable sensation that the story had some deep significance.¹ And yet there was change too. Since the early twelfth century, some chroniclers, for example Orderic Vitalis and William of Malmesbury, had traded in stories about the wondrous. These stories, for all their oddness, tended to fit into a larger providential scheme and to nestle into conventional theological categories. Extra-ecclesial elements certainly figured in accounts such as the stories of the witch of Berkeley and Walchelin’s vision of the wild hunt, but the moralities of these tales remained ultimately clear. The later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as we have seen, in [chapter 1](#), witnessed the further proliferation of such stories as the scope of things judged ‘worthy of being remembered’ by historical writers expanded. But, unlike the witch of Berkeley and Orderic’s wild hunt, many of these were much more subversive narratives – of green children, wild men, poltergeists, changelings, fairies. Much of this material, I have tentatively suggested, already had a currency in the wider world, circulating in rural parish, urban community and even the royal court. Its standing in those places, as idle story or active belief or,

¹ Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, pp. 71–2, 192–3.

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most likely, in a contested space between the two, lies over the event horizon. Deep knowledge of those elements of 'belief' are forever out of the historian's range. But our authors treated these stories seriously and, having written them down, were troubled that they could not be fitted into available theology and cosmology. The impulse to record, and the unease this caused, will be our starting point.

DISSOLVING WONDER: WALTER MAP

The first impulse of many churchmen, confronted by such complexities, was to squeeze wonders back into boxes labelled miraculous and demonic. But where this was not possible, where the ambiguity was too great, the alternative was to dissolve the very historicity of the stories. This was achieved not by contesting the testimony or rejecting what the witnesses saw but by showing that what was seen was not real. Ambiguous wonders became imaginings, illusions, demonically contrived hallucinations whose instability and insubstantiality confirmed their essential unimportance in the grand cosmological scheme. They were ultimately significant and valuable in only one way: befuddling and intractable wonder celebrated the frailty of the senses and the fragility of human understanding, serving to turn the audience back to truths anchored in revelation and away from the misleading witness of experience.

This was, in essence, the strategy of Walter Map although, as we shall see, his agenda also had additional elements. Walter Map opened up *De Nugis Curialium* to all sorts of ambiguous and morally cloudy wonder stories, piling them up in his untidy 'lumber-room' of a book.² There are lampoons of the religious orders, satires on the court, courtiers and women, some moralities drawn from recent history and a wealth of accounts about the supernatural. The riches of that last heap of material have led folklorists to celebrate its stories of fairies and ghosts and wild men but Map, though he wore many guises in *De Nugis*, was never a simple collector of folk tales. Nor for that matter was he a theological mould-breaker. For all the carnivalesque and glittering novelty of his writing, there was a traditional and austere theology running beneath its surface. For Map, armed with essentially Augustinian cosmological and demonological ideas, the wondrous divided into the miraculous and the demonic. He might speak of 'helpful' demons and elusive fairies but he never committed himself to any idea of their moral neutrality, turning

² The description is that of C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors. See Map, p. xix.

their ambiguity instead into a teaching tool. Using these narratives he played with the assumptions of his readers and hearers, warning the unwary about the delusions wrought by evil angels and catching and testing them in traps sprung by their own disordered values.

To make sense of Map's project we need to consider that the form in which *De Nugis* has come down to us was not that in which Map himself had left it. In his own provisional arrangement, as reconstructed by Hinton and modified by Christopher Brooke, Map turned first in the 'fourth distinction' to wonder tales with an obvious morality.³ Through these, the reader would, as the prologue had observed, 'be taught by those things which the Lord has set before us to imitate or avoid ... always praying him who is our refuge that he would grant us the power to choose purely the things that are good and escape evil'.⁴ There follow a series of tales about the delusions wrought by demons generally and *succubi* in particular. These narratives raised the dangers of commerce with demons and played in a quite explicit fashion with the theme of supernatural illusion to which those with a faulty moral compass might be easy prey.

We hear, for example, of how the nobleman 'Henno-with-the-Teeth' discovered a lovely girl in some woods and, overcome by desire, swept her away and eventually married her.⁵ Yet, for all the beauty that snared Henno, she seemed suspicious to his mother, who noted that she always left mass before the moment of consecration. Spying on her one day in the bath, she found that the girl was indeed not what she seemed and had taken the form of a dragon on entering the water. Map also reworked the well-known story of the fall of the infamous churchman and diviner, Gerbert (Pope Sylvester II), along similar lines, showing how he was trapped by a demon transfigured into a beautiful woman named Meridiana.⁶ Despite Gerbert's initial instinct to flee because he feared the tricks (*prestigia*) of a phantom (*fantasma*), he was, nonetheless, won over.⁷ She promised him heaven-sent prosperity and made the nicely ambiguous observation that she was as much God's creature as Gerbert himself. As in older versions of the tale, the special knowledge Gerbert was given allowed him to rise in the ranks of the church, only for him ultimately to over-reach himself, to come to the brink of death without repenting his sins and then to have to retreat into austere penitence at the

³ *Ibid.*, pp. xxix–xxxii; J. Hinton, 'Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*: its Plan and Composition', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 32 (1917), 81–132.

⁴ Map, pp. 278–9.

⁵ This nobleman is Haimo Dentatus, a Norman baron killed after rebelling against Duke William in 1047. See Map, pp. 344–5 n. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 350–57. For William of Malmesbury's version of this story see also above, pp. 164–5.

⁷ Map, pp. 352–3.

last.⁸ Here Map worked up the tale, suffusing it with romance motifs which were folded into a narrative about demonic temptation and worldly power in order to heighten the ambiguity and seductiveness of the demon.⁹ Yet Map's own voice, intervening periodically in the narrative, remained firm and constant. He was never in any doubt about Meridiana's status, warning his audience that by her sugary deceits she held Gerbert in the 'birdlime of the devil'.¹⁰

We find a similar pattern in Map's story of the heretic named Eudo de Stella. Here his targets had shifted slightly. He introduced the idea of a hierarchy of evil angels which faded at one end into ranks of neutral spirits but he also warned that dealings with even the most superficially benevolent of demons (for this was emphatically how Map construed them) placed the soul in grave peril. Eudo was tempted by an apparently benign spirit named Olga, who explained that some of his number were of a 'kindly disposition' and 'powerful helpers'.¹¹ Indeed, Olga said he would preserve Eudo, adding that minor demons 'do not drag men to hell nor torment them there' and he claimed that 'among the living we practice laughable tricks or make earnest jest and with the dead or with the destruction of souls we have no concern'.¹² Eudo was afraid of him 'on the authority of books' but the books had it wrong. He was not one of those evil spirits attacked by scripture and theology.¹³ Thus reassured, Eudo engaged Olga's services in a quest for terrestrial knowledge and earthly power and yet, once whetted, these appetites led him, just like Gerbert, into ever graver sins.

Hence, for all their honeyed words, spirits like Olga were always dangerous in Map's eyes. His claims to helpfulness, even his warnings to avoid mortal sin, were novel demonic coatings on a primordial bitter pill. Map denounced Olga as 'Satan' and uses the language of vassalage or pupillage to characterise a dangerously unequal relationship between the two in which the demon is Eudo's lord (*dominus*) or his master (*magister*).¹⁴ Olga was 'the lover and author of lies', only being 'honest with his servants about those truths which can do more harm than a lie'.¹⁵ So there were no 'neutral' supernatural agents whose counsels might bring worldly glory at no cost to the soul. But, as in the story of Gerbert, the key point was that Eudo was the author of his own demise. As Olga put it: 'we can show them [men] opportunities, but they as their disposition leads

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 362–3.

⁹ See R. E. Bennett, 'Walter Map's *Sadius and Galo*', *Speculum*, 16 (1941), 34–56; Map, pp. xlii–iii; M. J. Donovan, *The Breton Lays: a Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame, 1969); T. P. Crosse, 'The Celtic Elements in the Lays of Lanval and Graelent', *Modern Philology*, 12 (1914–15), 585–644.

¹⁰ Map, pp. 362–3. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 322–3. ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 328–9. ¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 318–19, 330–1, 336–7. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 330–1.

them can spare or destroy'.¹⁶ Eudo chose to sink into sin as he searched obsessively for power through the knowledge which the demon could furnish, the scale of his complicity dramatised by the demon's own ambiguity. What is on the surface a story of demonic delusion becomes also a story of self-deception, perhaps the most dangerous demons being inner sensations, cravings and desires.

These stories of demonic deceit were moralities that were complete in their own right but they also served as a frame for still more ambiguous material. Much of this dealt with 'fairy brides', and the stories Map told about them tended to follow similar patterns. Take for example the tale of a certain inhabitant of Brecon, Gwestin Gwestiniog who 'lived by the lake of Brycheiniog, which is two miles broad, and saw on three clear moonlit nights bands of women dancing in his field of oats, and followed them till they plunged into the water of the lake'.¹⁷ On the fourth night of this spectacle, Gwestin caught one of the women and took her home. She married him, bore him children but fled when he struck her with a bridle – the one prohibition she had laid on him when they agreed to wed.¹⁸ In a final flourish, Map added that all of her offspring disappeared with her save one, a boy called Triunein, who it was said continued to live with his father.¹⁹

In these stories, Map's guidance to his audience, so easy to come by in the stories of Gerbert and Eudo, vanished like the fairy bride herself. It was now for the audience 'to cut into shape the rough material' which Map had produced and to 'make dainty dishes' of the game he had caught for them.²⁰ Map's audience was abandoned, finding itself in a similar position to Henno, Eudo and Gerbert and left to make its own way. Yet they had been armed with a moral compass in the earlier stories, a means to make sense of the tale and navigate its treacherous shoals. The pedagogical game that Map was playing becomes manifest in the first of the fairy stories because here he gave his reader a scattering of clues about the dangers they faced as they read the story. He told how an Anglo-Saxon nobleman, Eadric the Wild, had encountered bands of fairy women. But in a strange and hallucinatory narrative we learn that Eadric had 'heard tell of the errors (*errores*) of the heathen, and of the nightly squadrons of devils and the deadly vision of them (*nocturnasque phalanges demonum et mortíferas eorum uisiones*), of Dictynna and the bands of Dryads and Lares'.²¹ Yet Eadric, like so many others, ignored the warnings, seized and married the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 322–3. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 148–9.

¹⁸ On this idea of a special condition or *geis* see J. R. Reinhard, *The Survival of the Geis in Romance* (Halle, 1933), pp. 290–2.

¹⁹ Map, pp. 148–55. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 208–9. ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 156–7.

fairy and only then repented at leisure when eventually she fled his household and his good fortune deserted him.

In subsequent stories, such as the tale of Gwestin Gwestiniog, Map offered his readers no clues at all. In telling such stories without any theological rubric he was mischievously holding the unwitting in blind amazement – amazement analogous to that which caught out Henno, Gerbert and Eudo. But Map, mindful of his obligation to edify, did not leave his readers permanently trapped. He shook them out of their paralysing wonderment once the morally neutral tales had run their course, speaking directly in a series of explanatory asides in which he made clear the conclusions readers should have reached on their own. He offered definitions and interpretations of demonic activities, describing how demons could beguile their victims by contriving superficially benign apparitions. He told stories from the classical past, all of which pointed the reader back to a traditional Augustinian demonology which split the spirit world into light and darkness. He defined words that he had previously used undefined to characterise the fairy women, telling his readers that *fantasma* meant a ‘passing apparition’ which ‘occasionally devils make to some by their own power (first receiving leave of God) . . .’²² The word Map used to characterise the qualities of both the overtly demonic *succubi* and the more neutral ‘fairy’ women, *fatalitatem*, was itself ambiguous. One moment it conjured up the image of the essentially amoral fay, as in the story of Eadric where ‘a great proof of her fairy (*fatalitatis*) nature was the beauty of the woman’. The next moment the word savoured of the Fates and their classical (demonic?) associations with Diana, Artemis, Dictynna, dryads, lares and a whole host of classical deities which had long since been resolved into the demonic.²³ Thus in a tale of a knight of Brittany who caught his dead wife from among a group of living fairy dancers ‘he marvelled and was afraid, and when he saw her whom he had buried, alive again, he could not trust his eyes and wondered what the fairies [*or* Fates (*fatis*)] were doing.’²⁴ He feared that he might be deluded by the ‘phantom (*fantasmate*)’, that word being defined elsewhere by Map specifically as meaning a demonically contrived illusion.

So, from the structure of the work, the interleaving of descriptive and didactic tales and the definitions of terms selectively offered up, it seems that Map was using the ambiguous supernatural for at least two rhetorical ends. First, he wanted to attack the idea that there were ‘neutral spirits’,

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 160–1.

²³ See for example the discussion of Diana and offerings made to her by pagans in *Layamon*, pp. 48–55.

²⁴ Map, pp. 344–5.

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squeezing the sorts of ambiguous beings we met in chapter 1 back into the miraculous and demonic. But secondly, he also wanted to make larger points about surface and substance, appearance and reality. Illusion was at the centre of these stories, whether conjured up externally by evil angels or inherent in the self-deception of the human actors. The historical status of the stories, what was substantial and what was illusory, was seldom established by Map. He felt none of the conventional obligations of the historian, not troubling too much whether at any particular moment he was retailing *historia* ('which is founded in truth') or *fabula* ('which weaves together fashioned things (*ficta*)').²⁵ Readers and hearers could hardly reproach him for this: the rules binding Map were relaxed because *De Nugis* belonged to no clear genre and so escaped expectations which came with such an identification. Having read or heard him, all they could know for sure, the only meaning they could with confidence extract, was that there was a great deal in the creation that was not known and could not be comprehended. One must trust in God, accept his mysteries and acknowledge humbly in praising him that 'his works transcend our questioning and escape our discussion'.²⁶

FASCINATION AND ANXIETY IN THE WRITINGS OF GERALD OF WALES

Gerald of Wales seems to have had a more complex and ambivalent relationship with the wisdom of the world than Walter Map. He eagerly noted wonders as he travelled through Wales and Ireland, deeming them natural, demonic and miraculous. But he also saw and heard about many which defied explanation in these terms: mysterious dreams which misled the dreamer, does which caused illness and death to hunters, otherworlds which were not heavenly nor hellish nor purgatorial, magical bones which disclosed the future.²⁷ They could not be accommodated in any rational account of the ordinary world and they did not fit easily into the supernatural order because their origins and meanings were opaque. Gerald's searching out of secrets filled him with fascination but also trapped him in anxiety about what he had found. Such sensations seem to run through a number of his stories which were at once didactic and reflexive, warning others against putting too much trust in worldly learning and also undercutting his own preoccupying interest in such things.

This complexity is to be seen in several of his elaborately wrought tales of evil angels. These stories functioned as extended meditations on the dangers

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 218–19. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 160–1.

²⁷ GW, *IK*, pp. 17, 75–8, 87–9, 170–1.

of worldly knowledge when questing for it was stretched to extremes. They grew out of the idea that those who had intimate contact with *succubi* or *incubi* might inherit some of their special powers – an idea employed by Geoffrey of Monmouth who claimed that Merlin was the child of an *incubus* and acquired his magical skills from him.²⁸ Gerald told a story of a man called Meilyr who had been seduced by a *succubus*.²⁹ As a result of his encounter, Meilyr had power to see devils and detect sins. On the surface, this seemed a gift: he could predict the fall of Welsh princes, uncover crimes and even encourage sinners to repentance.³⁰ As in Map's stories engagement with evil spirits seemed at first to have produced varied results and mixed messages, but Meilyr's special ability was revealed ultimately as a curse. Even when the effects were salutary, the knowledge itself was dangerous, for its acquisition stemmed from commerce with the devil and, although Gerald spoke neutrally about Meilyr initially, he changed his tone when describing how the soothsayer died. Gerald observed that, for all his powers of prognostication, he failed to foresee his own impending death during the siege of Usk, concluding acidly that 'the Enemy knows how to favour his friends, but this is how he is accustomed to reward them in the end'.³¹

Such criticism of soothsayers was not uncommon. John of Salisbury, who was, as we have seen, very worried about divination, warned that some seers told deliberate lies but at other times 'deceived themselves by their own blindness'.³² Yet Gerald's willingness to expatiate on the activities of Meilyr only to judge them harshly in the end strikes a different note from John's discussion. An explanation for that discordance is most probably to be found in Gerald's own ambivalent and shifting relationship with worldly knowledge of which this prudential use of prophecy was an element. Monika Otter has argued plausibly that Meilyr might be a 'parodic alter ego of the historian' because prophecy, as many of Gerald's peers agreed, represented simply an extension of history in another temporal direction.³³ But, given that Gerald was writing not just about history but also about nature, geography, the properties of things and even magic, the story of Meilyr might be functioning as a broader allegorizing morality. Its targets were not just the practices of historians but questing after worldly knowledge in all its forms – and the perils of putting faith in them.

²⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth with Contributions to the Study of its Place in British History*, eds. and trans. A. Griscom and R. Ellis Jones (London, 1929), pp. 380–2.

²⁹ GW, *IK*, pp. 57–61. For the parallels between Meilyr and Merlin see Otter, *Inventiones*, pp. 152–3.

³⁰ GW, *IK*, p. 59. ³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60–1. ³² See also JS, *Pol.*, I, p. 128. See above, pp. 160–1.

³³ Otter, *Inventiones*, pp. 153–4.

This rhetorical strategy worked because of an important fact about knowledge possessed by human beings and demons: the two acquired knowledge in ways that were in essence similar. What made demonic knowledge of past, future and the properties of things superior was simply the greater perspicacity of evil angels derived from their aerial bodies, sharper senses and longer experience. Augustine had stressed this point and it was not lost on twelfth-century writers. One of Walter Map's evil spirits had explained his extensive knowledge of the stars, herbs, spices, stones and trees on exactly this basis.³⁴ He could also predict many events, just as a mortal man could foresee the sinking of the noonday sun, but others, he had to concede, were shielded from him by the mysteriousness of divine intentions. Gerald shared Map's understanding of demonology. He noted that the Devil could work out what would happen in the future 'from certain conjectural signs' and 'from his knowledge of what happened in the past' but for all his great skill in these matters he sometimes made mistakes.³⁵ If men possessed analogous but weaker capacities to reason in this way about the world, how much more likely was it that their conclusions would be the wrong ones? The wisdom of the world, turned to prudential purposes, was an imperfect and dangerous thing. Stories in which demonic knowledge failed, and especially those in which a compact of human and demonic learning brought disaster, warned not simply against dabbling in dark arts, they also made a more general point that *all* worldly knowledge was frail and should not be the ultimate repository of human trust.

That Gerald, of all historical writers, should enter on such a meditation, might seem odd. As we have seen, Gerald dedicated himself to the reasoned exploration of both nature and human affairs in his topographical and descriptive writings and yet he remained nervous about the dangers of being dazzled by this sort of knowledge. We have seen this already. Gerald resiled from speculation in the face of the most baffling marvels such as the account of the fairy realm entered by the young Pembrokeshire priest.³⁶ His *Gemma Ecclesiastica* offers hints about why he did this. Here Gerald cited St Paul, warning that God 'will destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the learning of the learned' and that 'the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the sight of God'.³⁷ He showed through examples how the philosopher 'puffed up with boastful pride because of his skill in disputation and the subtlety of his logic' might

³⁴ Map, pp. 332–3. See also Augustine, *City of God*, III, pp. 68–73. ³⁵ Map, pp. 320–4.

³⁶ See above, pp. 31–2.

³⁷ Gerald of Wales, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, II, pp. 145–55. See I Corinthians 1: 19; cf Job 5: 12–13.

be knocked down by the unlearned peasant whose pious verities spoke more deeply than the learning of the world. It seems that as Gerald grew older the warning of the *Gemma*-text exercised him more. In later works, he shunned speculative investigation in favour of moralising and retreated into a more traditional Augustinian approach, interpreting the world as a sea of signs which pointed back to scriptural truths.

This trend is visible even in the later recensions of his works dealing with Wales and Ireland. It is perhaps most striking in *Expugnatio Hibernica*. Gerald seems originally to have been envisaging this as a *Historia Vaticinalis* in which Merlinian prophecies were the heart of a text designed to work outwards from the history of English intervention in Ireland to foretell what would become of it. And yet he subsequently retreated from this ambitious project, turning later recensions of the text into more straightforwardly historical pieces in which the prophecies were slimmed down and qualified. Some commentators have suggested this was simply careful editing designed to avoid the wrath of Henry II but Gerald's failure to restore the material when the king died and his readiness to offend John even more grievously in his later writing suggests something more was at stake here. The most recent editors of the *Expugnatio* have suggested that, though Gerald may have believed the predictions of Merlin Celidonius and Merlin Ambrosius when he first wrote, doubts entered his mind later in his career.³⁸ These creeping suspicions may not have been limited to scepticism about the practical value of such prophecy. They may have had a deeper origin in alarm about the morality of trusting in and dwelling on worldly prognostications. Such a drift is also reflected in later recensions of the *Topographia* and *Itinerarium*. Here, although Gerald did not set about excising material, he added little that was new to his discussions of causation and tended instead to lard the narrative with moral glosses.³⁹ Significantly, the elaborate discussion of Meilyr represents one of these late accretions and it seems that the seer's demise, a result of being drawn too deeply into dependence on knowledge of worldly things, was both emblematic and reflexive. It was offered up as a warning to those who placed too much trust in their learning, but it also functioned as a meditation on Gerald's own growing ambivalence about the value of worldly wisdom.

EMANCIPATING WONDER: GERVASE OF TILBURY

We can see that Walter Map and Gerald of Wales for all their differences shared much mental furniture in common. And this should not surprise us

³⁸ Gerald of Wales, *Expugnatio Hibernica: the Conquest of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis*, ed. and trans. A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin, Royal Irish Academy (1978), pp. lxi–lxviii.

³⁹ GW, *IK*, pp. ix–xxi.

given that they were of roughly the same generation and were fashioned and formed in the schools of the mid-twelfth century.⁴⁰ But if we move to the next generation and to Gervase of Tilbury we find some significant shifts of attitude. As we have seen, Gervase exhibits a still more robust sense of nature than that seen in Gerald's work, separating the natural and the supernatural in a harder and faster way than any of his predecessors were willing to do.⁴¹ He was very ready to pursue naturalising explanations and was willing to demystify wonders if he thought them vulnerable to reason. We even glimpse him testing some claims about the wondrous for himself. On visiting the Benedictine monastery of Barjols, where it was alleged that no fly ever entered the refectory, he cast himself as a 'careful explorer (*sedulus explorator*)' and verified that, for all his efforts to entice them in with sweet substances, no fly would enter.⁴²

Underpinning such speculative explanation and investigation was a strong sense of the value of empirical data, whether accumulated by the author himself or mediated through reliable witnesses. Gervase attached great significance to the words of the trustworthy eyewitness and to the corroboration offered by multiple accounts of the same phenomenon.⁴³ As a result he distinguished clearly between *historia* (the stuff of authentic narrative) and *fabula* or *facta* (the story or tale) and rejected 'idle tales'.⁴⁴ He stressed that he accepted only 'things which are sanctioned by the authority of age, or confirmed by the authority of scripture or attested by daily eyewitness accounts'.⁴⁵ But his altered perspective can be seen clearly in a readiness to 'gratify popular belief' where it was supported on the testimony of *uulgares* or *rustici*, so long as this was plentiful.

This was all very different from the framework in which Walter Map operated. Map let stories in freely because they ultimately had little power to shake convictions born of scripture and tradition and so could be valuable authorial playthings. Gervase turned this conventional epistemological wisdom inside out. For Gervase, trading in authenticated wonder stories might offer empirical support to the teachings of the church. For example he verified the idea of supra-celestial waters not only with reference to authority but also by telling extraordinary stories about the phenomenon. He related how some parishioners in the

⁴⁰ M. Richter, *The Formation of the Medieval West: Studies in the Oral Culture of the Barbarians* (Dublin, 1994), pp. 165–6.

⁴¹ See above, pp. 32–3. ⁴² GT, pp. 574–5.

⁴³ He tells many stories on the basis of things he has himself seen, including his account of how storks sleep in the sea and how he saw fishermen haul them out in nets. See GT, pp. 680–1. He says also in one version of the text that he will paint a picture of the world on the basis of eyewitness accounts, GT, pp. 899–900.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 708–9. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 558–9.

south-west of England had seen a ship sailing through the clouds as they waited outside their church – noting that an anchor lost by the ship could still be found worked into the furniture of the porch door.⁴⁶ He also added another story in which a man of Bristol went sailing and dropped a knife overboard from his boat while he was, so he thought, in the Irish Sea. But the knife fell through the skylight of his own house and stuck fast in the table there.⁴⁷ Reliable testimony could, in Gervase's eyes, help to validate the claims of tradition.

Possible reasons can quickly be found for Gervase's different perspective. He was a cosmopolitan and well-informed churchman and it seems that he swept up material as he travelled. Parts of *Otia Imperialia* read like a commonplace book hybridised with a travelogue. He was also more of an encyclopedist than Walter or Gerald, eager to lay the wonders of history, geography and the marvellous before his royal patron, Otto IV. Glorifying in this worldly knowledge to curry favour with the prince, he might even represent that garrulous tale-telling side of the court which earlier secular churchmen had been worried about. And yet Gervase was not like other, earlier, encyclopedists either. He had read Honorius Augustodunensis but he eschewed the kind of straightforward description found in texts such as the *Imago Mundi* and added to it the rafts of speculative explanation we met in chapter 1.⁴⁸ But there was still more to the change of perspective found in Gervase than differences of opportunity, genre and audience.

The key here lies deeper in his different intellectual formation. It is striking that Gervase embraced new ideas about penance and purgatory far more readily than the previous generation of secular churchmen because such ideas were far more deeply rooted by the time he passed through the schools. So too attitudes to worldly, practical knowledge had evolved since Walter Map and even Gerald of Wales passed through their halls. Thus Gervase read Augustine and Gregory and Isidore as they had done but he also read, and was influenced by, Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*.⁴⁹ Peter's intellectual debts were partly to Andrew of St Victor, that leading exponent of naturalising explanation, and so it is no surprise that in plundering the *Historia*, Gervase became comfortable with such thought himself. Gervase was also less worried about retailing this-worldly knowledge because he grew up in an intellectual environment in which 'the world' was being more generally rehabilitated. Walter and to some extent Gerald may have passed through the schools but monastic

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–81. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

⁴⁸ V. I. J. Flint, 'Honorius Augustodunensis', in P. J. Geary (ed.), *Authors of the Middle Ages: Historical and Religious Writers of the Latin West*, vol. vi (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 89–183. See above pp. 32–3.

⁴⁹ S. R. Daly, 'Peter Comestor: Master of Histories', *Speculum*, 32 (1957), 62–73.

ethics continued to exercise a profound influence over the thought of that mid twelfth-century cohort of secular churchmen. In Map's violent rhetorical swings from lambasting the shortcomings of the Cistercians to lauding the rigours of the Carthusians, we see a man who could never ignore monastic culture even if he abhorred the failings of many within the cloister.⁵⁰ But this was a world in which the monastic hegemony was quickly passing. When Ernald, Cistercian abbot of Rievaulx, wanted to indulge his interest in history, he commissioned the Augustinian canon William of Newburgh to produce a chronicle for him, as this still seemed a dubious business for a Cistercian monk.⁵¹ Yet in the early thirteenth century we find Ralph, abbot of the Cistercian house at Coggeshall, eagerly compiling a history for himself and filling it with wonders of the most extraordinary and ambiguous kinds. In their intellectual pursuits, as in so many other ways, the Cistercians had been absorbed by the world they sought to escape. And so for men like Gervase, the hard words once uttered by William of St Thierry about the perils of speculative inquiry were very distant echoes.

Similarly, the sort of rebuke Bernard of Clairvaux delivered to those who were all ears for stories of Arthur but nodded through a sermon was by the end of the twelfth century but the faintest of vibrations.⁵² Tale-telling, especially the professional narration and song-singing of the jongleurs, had once been an object of derision: Orderic Vitalis had attacked their songs and stories and said that he preferred reliable written accounts; Wace had lamented that history was lost in fable as story-tellers told and retold their tales and decked truth with invention.⁵³ Peter Abelard and Honorius Augustodunensis had even doubted that men who pursued such dubious professions could be saved, sentiments which reverberated through the writings of Peter of Blois who, though writing later, was formed intellectually by the schools of the mid-twelfth century. But, as Michael Richter has noted, by the final quarter of that same century Peter Chanter, though critical of the professional tale-teller, found their vocation more acceptable. He no longer held that it was likely to condemn its practitioners' souls to hell.⁵⁴ Thomas of Chobham,

⁵⁰ The Carthusian, Gilbertine and Grandmontine ethics attracted warm words even as Map savaged the Cistercians and Benedictines for falling short (by sliding into worldliness) of their ideals. See Map, pp. 50–5, 84–117.

⁵¹ See for qualification of arguments that the Cistercians were hostile to historical writing E. A. Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Historical Writing in England, c. 1150–1200* (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 6–10.

⁵² Cited from M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992), pp. 61–2.

⁵³ OV, III, pp. 218–19 and see also Orderic's reluctance to tell 'dubious tales', *ibid.*, VI, pp. 440–1; Wace, trans. Mason, ix, p. 56. See also discussion in Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, p. 767.

⁵⁴ Richter, *Medieval West*, pp. 161–72.

formed in the same spirit of accommodation, took a similar view in his manual for confessors written in the early thirteenth century. The professional tale-teller and song-singer was part of the social fabric of European court life in the twelfth century, but, as churchmen embraced the world and sprinkled holy water over lay vocations, they drew in the tale-teller and his tales.⁵⁵

EMPIRICIST IMPULSES

The shifting understanding of the natural and supernatural orders in the writings of churchmen had significant repercussions for the status of wonder stories. We can trace these through two case studies. The first explores how narratives of the wild hunt came to be co-opted by clerical writers in the service of moralising and theological agendas. The second will examine a similar process of reinterpretation of matter dealing with demons, fairies and witches. The common thread running through both is the growing willingness of churchmen to take up the wondrous, developing stories about it as explanatory tools and simultaneously investing them with greater theological and moral significance.

The matter at the heart of the first of these case studies, the 'wild hunt', is rather elusive. The hunt is an established element of 'folklore'; a recognised story 'type' but the traditions surrounding it are very varied. Medieval accounts ranged from stories about hosts of souls in torment, the classic instance here being the vision of Walchelin that we met in chapter 5, through phantom companies of drovers herding spectral livestock to parades of demons.⁵⁶ Its leadership was often ascribed to mysterious figures named Herlechin, Herlewin or Harlequin but sometimes it was King Arthur or even the Devil himself who led the nocturnal squadrons.⁵⁷ Running through the stories was a common thread: the idea of a ceaseless, spectral, wandering host. This was well-diffused

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 171–2.

⁵⁶ See above, pp. 173–5. For the many versions of the hunt across Europe see Schmitt, *Ghosts*, pp. 93–119 and note also Gerald's allusion when he depicts Meilyr as being able to see demons in the guise of huntsmen chasing souls in *GW, IK*, pp. 57–61. Gervase of Tilbury has Arthur as the leader of the hunt on the authority of stories reported by foresters in Brittany; William of Malmesbury offers a stranger classicising account in which a troop (perhaps of demons or the dead) are witnessed by a living man. See *WM, GR*, I, pp. 380–5; and for discussion P. F. Baum, 'The Young Man Betrothed to a Statue', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 34 (1919), 523–79.

⁵⁷ On the etymology of the name Herlechin/Harlequin see L. Sainéau, 'La Mesnie Hellequin', *Revue des traditions populaires*, 20 (1905), 177–86; also F. Lot, 'La Mesnie Hellequin et le comte Ernequin de Boulogne', *Romania*, 23 (1903), 422–41; Schmitt, *Ghosts*, pp. 115–44.

enough by the late twelfth century for Peter of Blois to satirise allusively the aimless meanderings of worldly clerks as being like those of *milites Herlewini*.⁵⁸

So stories of the hunt were well known. But their status in medieval texts shifted according to particular context and genre and also, so it seems, over time. For Walter Map the marvellous hunt was a light thing and was liberated by the historical indeterminacy of the story he told for the satirical purpose of lampooning the court. King Herla's huntsmen, having entered fairyland, returned to their own realm to find time had swept by while they had been away and now, if any dismounted, they crumbled instantly to dust.⁵⁹ Unable to leave their horses, the gruesome never-ending ride of this royal party became a metaphor for the ceaseless motion of King Henry's court. Beneath the earthy political satire there was a theological point which Map made, characteristically, by forcing the very lightness of this story to work for his moral ends. The whirlings of hunt, the worldly wanderings of the royal court and even his own literary meanderings all stood in sharp contradiction to the fundamental stability which was to be sought and found in God. Map was, again, warning his readers, his hearers and himself to turn aside from preoccupied worldliness in all its absorbing and seductive movement and change.

Where Map revelled in the ambiguities of the wild hunt, others, in composing more conventional histories, were obliged to take a firmer position about its historical status. In entering such a story in a chronicle an author could not leave its authenticity and origins cloudy, as Map had deliberately done, and was obliged to offer at least a provisional explanation of how it fitted into the cosmic scheme. Some depictions of the hunt in historical writing entailed more straightforward rationalisations than others. The hunt might easily be demonised and thus turned into a terrifying sign. When Henry of St Jean d'Angely arrived at Peterborough Abbey the monks let it be known that the unpopular Norman abbot had let loose powerful spiritual forces.⁶⁰ The wild hunt was modelled in the house chronicles (both the Peterborough Chronicle itself and an abridged Latin version offered by Hugh Candidus) as a ghastly demonic effusion which roamed the woods and precincts of the monastery. Whether this hunt was 'real' or illusory scarcely mattered as, either way, it mirrored without the bitter strife within the cloister and delivered a judgement on the new head of house. The theory of divine

⁵⁸ Peter of Blois, *Epistolae*, col. 44. ⁵⁹ Map, pp. 26–31.

⁶⁰ *Peterborough Chronicle*, pp. 153–5; Hugh Candidus, *The Peterborough Chronicle of Hugh Candidus*, trans. C. and W. T. Mellows (Peterborough, 1941) p. 101.

signs, conventional demonology, and the hope of a monastic audience hungry for otherworldly authorisation of hostile sentiments, thus conspired to produce a colourful but theologically unremarkable polemic. Reliable eye-witness testimony had supplied a meaning-rich story which fitted easily into that Augustinian moral universe familiar to the chronicler.

Others were in a more complex business when they glossed stories of the hunt in less well-established theological terms. In Orderic's account, the *familia Herlechini* was re-engineered around more novel ideas.⁶¹ As we have seen, a theology of purgatorial fire rather than signs and demons offered an intellectualisation of Walchelin's vision which Orderic anticipated would not go unchallenged among his audience. To counter this he was obliged to work with the grain of their thought about the world, overturning doubts about an extraordinary story by piling up hard evidence. Orderic was at pains to present Walchelin himself as a reliable witness. He had been a sceptic who discounted tales about the *familia Herlechini* until he saw the 'shades of the dead (*manes mortuorum*)' before his own eyes.⁶² The priest moved in a world of doubters, anticipating that his neighbours would not believe his story unless he could produce some physical evidence to corroborate it. The priest had got his token, Orderic claiming that, when he questioned him, he saw a scar received at the hands of the terrible knights.⁶³ Such details mattered because this story was not anchored firmly in an established theological framework. Its claims were not so easily supported from revelation and authority or even from tradition – something which Orderic was trying to shape. Instead, to make his story about purgatorial punishment and prayer for the dead stick, Orderic relied more heavily on the resources of the historian – authenticated and corroborated eyewitness testimony about things which had been seen and felt.

The wild hunt reveals how wonder stories might be reinvented in particular circumstances and for specific ends but there might also be more general reasons for churchmen to become interested in them. We have already noted that Orderic Vitalis thought miracles were vanishing from an age in which the faith had grown cold.⁶⁴ Such fear was not new. Augustine had talked about it and Aelfric of Eynsham took it up, using the theme in his sermons and conjuring with the image of a world in which religious fervour had cooled.⁶⁵ Other chroniclers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also alighted on this bleak idea. They knew of a glorious past, described by Bede, in which the faith was young and

⁶¹ See above pp. 173–5. ⁶² OV, IV, pp. 242–3. ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 248–9. ⁶⁴ See above, p. 40.

⁶⁵ See Murray, *Reason and Society*, p. 9 n. 9.

miracles were plentiful but they were also aware that in the world around them miracles were now rare. Faced by this, Henry of Huntingdon's only consolation was that wonders, when they did occur, now burned more brightly in the darkness.⁶⁶ One response to this predicament was to retreat from a world visibly sliding into the end times and wait out the working of providence. But, among chroniclers more eager to affirm the world, men frequently caught up in a pastoral campaign to save it, these grim jeremiads about a dying universe were cold comfort. Instead, they might be inclined to make the most of the miraculous, to show how wonder still filled the creation, and to hold it, through the telling of stories, before the eyes of believers. The austere monastic vision required faith to water the tree of miracles, but that wonder-seeking piety, which we have met in earlier chapters, and which was so prevalent in the world might require the reversal of this logic.

This might be especially important in an age when the miraculous seemed to be shrinking as reason seemed to be dissolving the mysteries of the world. We have already seen that the mid-twelfth century witnessed the first stirrings of alarm at the spread of forms of naturalising explanation.⁶⁷ Criticism was heaped on William of Conches and his followers because they were too ready to replace wonder at the workings of the divine with demystifying exegesis of causes. Such an approach to knowledge was far too this-worldly in its orientation for the taste, especially, of its Cistercian critics but some opponents of the new philosophy felt able to push their critiques even further. William of St Thierry claimed, perhaps a little melodramatically, that some now followed the ancient pagans in thinking that nothing existed beyond the corporeal and that there was no God in the world.⁶⁸ Invasive physicalising explanation and excessive interest in the causes of things were coming to be portrayed as solvents of faith itself.

Danger was not only apprehended in that abstract philosophising about the world which the schools had generated. It also had a vernacular counterpart, in that worldly, seeing-is-believing scepticism ascribed by Orderic to priest and parishioners in Walchelin's vision. This was far from new.⁶⁹ Gregory the Great framed his discussion of vision-narratives with the claim that there were men who mocked the idea of a retributive afterlife because there was no hard evidence for it.⁷⁰ Similar scepticism

⁶⁶ OV, III, pp. 214–15; HH, pp. 686–7, 695; Murray, *Reason and Society*, pp. 9–10; J. Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles in the *Ecclesiastical History*', *Traditio*, 31 (1975), 328–35.

⁶⁷ See above pp. 28–30.

⁶⁸ N. M. Häring, 'The Creator and the Creation according to William of Thierry and Clarembaldas of Arras', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 22 (1955), 137–216.

⁶⁹ For further examples see Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 41–4. ⁷⁰ Gregory, *Dialogues*, bk III, c. 38.

was still alive in the central middle ages. Osbern of Canterbury pointed to doubt in opening his disquisition on the miracles of St Dunstan, offering a long account of why wonders should be believed. He stressed in particular that miracles must not be rejected simply because the doubter had never witnessed anything of the kind himself.⁷¹ At the very beginning of the thirteenth century Peter of Cornwall, prior of Holy Trinity Aldgate in London, went even further. He prefixed his great vision collection, the *Liber Revelationum*, with a warning that there were some men and women who did not believe in God, who thought the universe had always existed and held that chance rather than providence ruled its patterns. 'Many people', he added, 'believe only in what they can see and do not believe in good or bad angels, nor do they believe that the human soul lives on after the body.'⁷²

Gervase of Tilbury laced a number of his own stories with similar words. He feared that the capacity to wonder was lost to many even when they were confronted by events which admitted no clear cause, warning that 'there are some people who do not believe in anything supernatural (*fantastica*), and even if they do not know the reason (*causam*) for things, they do not marvel (*non mirantur*) at their existence.'⁷³ Others, he felt, were unmindful of the otherworld. They mocked stories about the torments of hell and poured scorn on descriptions of the afterlife as 'nonsense' (*friuola*).⁷⁴ They would not accept what scripture had to say about the hereafter unless it had been authenticated by someone who rose from the dead or appeared after death to confirm the truthfulness of the church's teaching. Gervase moved to stack this testimony up. Through his words he would bring the miraculous to view 'as if present to sight' and allow the reliable witness, sometimes distant in time or space, to speak authoritatively about what he or she had seen and felt.⁷⁵

This activity was a legitimate means to overcome doubt born of experience and, even if it was not Gervase's primary reason for writing, it is important that he thought it a good enough justification for recording wonder stories. He expected these words about doubters to strike a chord.⁷⁶ So here we have the germ of a more general reason why churchmen might be so eager to examine stories about the wondrous. In a world in which seeing-is-believing scepticism existed, visible signs might have

⁷¹ *Memorials of St Dunstan Edited from Various Manuscripts*, ed. W. Stubbs (RS, 1874), pp. 129–30.

⁷² The translation is by Robert Bartlett in Bartlett, *England*, p. 478. ⁷³ GT, pp. 738–9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 758–9.

⁷⁵ This is something of a commonplace but was uttered in this instance by Henry of Huntingdon in HH, p. 2.

⁷⁶ See R. French and A. Cunningham, *Before Science: the Invention of the Friars' Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 70–98.

an especially significant role in buttressing faith. Writing for worldly courtiers and soaked himself in their culture and that of the schools, Gervase reinforced belief not with simple exhortations to faith but with a cornucopia of authenticated wonders. He worked with the grain of his courtly audience's thought, playing on their desire for novelties and delighting their ears with marvels. He scrutinised more closely the anomalies and mysteries which stood out in a patterned and ordered world because among these might be found scintillations of the divine. Thus he might simultaneously entertain his royal patron and reweave the spell of wonder broken by absorption in the ordinariness of the world.⁷⁷ He knew that 'the appetite of the human mind is always keen to hear and lap up novelties' and so he must seek them out. He must, as he explained, draw out the essential 'strangeness' within the familiar and the 'miraculousness' within the 'natural'.⁷⁸

A consequence of this sort of searching was that many stories which had not earlier been recorded were now accepted by men like Gervase into their writings. Walter Map let such material in, but only on very special terms. Orderic did so but only very selectively, his authenticated narrative of the *familia Herlechini* finding a place in the *Ecclesiastical History* because it could be glossed to teach a particular theology. Gervase, with his high valuation of testimony, went much further in giving stories drawn from local culture an *imprimatur*. In so doing, stories told by the folk in the localities (and sometimes given short shrift there) were sublimated into hard realities with theological ramifications.

We can see this process at work in the rehabilitation of stories about night-riding 'witches', fairies and changelings. Like tales of the wild hunt, medieval stories about night-flying and witches were heterogeneous and locally varied. At their heart, we find frequently the claim that some women believed they rode at night through the sky in the company of Diana (sometimes Herodias).⁷⁹ Such accounts were often associated with others about dangerous beings in human guise, often called *lamia* or *stria* or *larvae*, who injured or killed the living as they slept and had a particular inclination to attack children.⁸⁰ In some narratives other ambiguous figures which we might loosely label fairies sometimes crowd in as well. The key here is not the tangle of various lore itself but rather the shifting reaction of churchmen. Clerical responses changed markedly over time, from initial dismissal of these tales as fevered imaginings to eventual

⁷⁷ GT, pp. 14–15. ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 558–9.

⁷⁹ See for example Ginzburg, *Ectasies*, pp. 89–121; Russell, *Witchcraft*, p. 118; Peters, *Magician*, pp. 21–84; and more recently Stephens, *Demon Lovers*.

⁸⁰ Russell, *Witchcraft*, pp. 116–18.

full-blown endorsement, on the basis of testimony, of their reality. Here the rising stock of knowledge derived from experience can be seen at work helping to bring about a transformation of perceptions.

The earliest discussion of night-flying is to be found in the *Canon Episcopi* which first emerged in Regino of Prüm's canon law collection of 906.⁸¹ This text rejected the claims of women who thought they flew through the air with Diana at night as vain illusions or imaginings. Those who believed such things and told such tales were guilty of peddling superstition and should do a (rather light) penance for their foolishness. Later writers followed this lead. Burchard of Worms reiterated the condemnation almost verbatim in his *Corrector*.⁸² In the twelfth century Gratian incorporated the accepted wisdom into his *Decretum* and it was also filtered into the variant version of the penitential manual of Bartholomew Iscanus.⁸³ Here the text condemned those who thought they rode in 'the company which the vulgar call the company of Diana or Herodias (*in famulatu ... quam uulgus ... Herodianum uel Dianam uocant*)'.⁸⁴ This was but a 'demonic illusion (*daemone illusionem*)', as were a host of other things which some thought real, including belief in the works of the Fates and fairies or the idea that some men and women changed into wolves or other animals.⁸⁵ Genre did not dictate this hostile reception of folkish tales. John of Salisbury shared the view of the canon lawyers and penitentiaries and reiterated it in his *Policraticus*.⁸⁶ He castigated those who believed that they (or others) rode through the hours of darkness in the company of 'Luna' or Herodias or the 'Mistress of the Night' to harass the living and harm sleeping children. These were but the illusory snares of 'mocking demons' and the faithful must 'refuse to listen to such lies and never give thought to follies and inanities of this kind'.⁸⁷

But then we find a dramatic shift. Gervase of Tilbury was willing to do exactly what John cautioned against and spilt a great deal of ink on the sorts of extra-ecclesial stories his predecessor dismissed summarily as imagined. He described *lamia* who entered houses by night and attacked people in their sleep and stole babies.⁸⁸ He also talked about more obscure spirits called *dracs* (water spirits) which he said 'the common people claim put on human form and that their leaders come to crowded market places

⁸¹ See *Witchcraft in Europe, 1100–1700* eds. and trans. A. C. Kors and E. Peters (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 29–31.

⁸² Burchard of Worms, *Corrector siue Medicus*, in *Die Bussbücher*, pp. 403–67 at p. 425.

⁸³ For discussion see Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, pp. 126–31. ⁸⁴ *Reliquiae Antiquae*, I, p. 285.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 285–6.

⁸⁶ See L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 2 vols. (London, 1923), II, pp. 155ff; Russell, *Witchcraft*, p. 116.

⁸⁷ JS, *Pol.*, I, pp. 100–101. ⁸⁸ GT, pp. 716–19, 722–3.

without anyone recognising them'.⁸⁹ Like so many churchmen, in telling these tales Gervase appealed to Augustine to justify what he was doing but he read him in rather a different way. Gervase departed from an orthodoxy which privileged fevered imagination and illusory works of evil spirits as explanations of why people believed they saw or experienced such things.⁹⁰ He rehearsed the traditional doubt about whether common reports of night-flying and strange beings really enshrined realities.⁹¹ But he also piled up a great deal of empirical data which contradicted this view and revealed him as relatively immune to the idea that these might be the contrivances of evil angels. He tackled doubts about *incubi* and *succubi* on this basis and argued that 'there is too widespread a folk belief in a phenomenon which many people have experienced for themselves, or have reliably heard described by other people from first-hand experience, whose word is trustworthy'.⁹²

Gervase was also happy to heap up authenticated stories of ambiguous fairy women as additional empirical evidence for the hard reality of these beings. He argued that 'here is something we do know, confirmed daily as it is by men who are beyond all reproach: we have heard that some men have become the lovers of larvas (*larue*) of this kind, which they called fays (*fada*), and when they have transferred their affections with a view to marrying other women, they have died before they could enjoy carnal union with their new partners'.⁹³ And he operated in the same way again in dealing with women who were mysteriously transformed into serpents, racking up evidence from common report. This belief, he said, 'is certainly remarkable, but not to be repudiated . . . for in England we have often seen men change into wolves according to the phases of the moon'.⁹⁴ Where the redactor of Bartholomew Iscanus's penitential had attacked this as a foolish and superstitious belief, Gervase endorsed it because the evidence of the senses was real and not imagined.⁹⁵ In these reflections Gervase showed himself to be far more incautious about common report than his immediate predecessors.

Gervase rehearsed a range of explanations of why these things might seem to happen. He acknowledged that some people might be

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 718–19.

⁹⁰ He drew on discussions from Augustine dealing with *incubi* and *succubi* and added detail both from Geoffrey of Monmouth (about the conception of Merlin) and from Apuleius. See GT, pp. 96–7.

⁹¹ Russell, *Witchcraft*, p. 118. ⁹² GT, pp. 728–9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 730–31. Gervase also illustrated his point about the reality of these things with a story about the lord of Rousset near Aix who married a mysterious woman who laid the obligation on him never to see her naked – but on glimpsing her in the bath he found she had taken on the shape of a serpent. See GT, pp. 88–91.

⁹⁴ On werewolves, *ibid.*, pp. 812–13. ⁹⁵ *Reliquiae Antiquae*, 1, p. 285.

predisposed, by a melancholic temperament, to think they were seeing phantasms (and he drew on Augustine to make this point). Equally, he accepted that some might have hallucinations during a fever.⁹⁶ But he was also open to the idea that some of these stories were real: neither old demonology nor the new physic would do as universal explanations.⁹⁷ He was willing to 'allow that it is the wretched lot of some men and women to cover great distances in a swift nocturnal flight; they enter houses, torment people in their sleep, inflict distressing dreams on them'.⁹⁸ For 'there are other opinions which I cannot dismiss, since I know women, neighbours of ours, well-advanced in years, who used to tell me that they had seen in the night-time troops of men and women stripped naked, to their shame'.⁹⁹ He added that 'some women flew through the night in companies of *lamia* and any who said the name of Christ would fall to the ground'.¹⁰⁰ He showed that a great mass of testimony from aged (and hence implicitly reliable witnesses) told against the other explanations and, to clinch his argument, he also let loose a final devastating piece of evidence. He had seen with his own eyes a woman 'who fell into the river Rhone from the sky for this very reason'.¹⁰¹ Hard empirical evidence stood theology and philosophy on their head. Things once suspended between *fabula* and *relatio autentica* were rehabilitated as historical facts.

OPPORTUNITY AND PERIL IN THE WONDER STORIES

As was suggested in chapter 1, apprehensions of nature were shaped during the twelfth century by a growing awareness of its essential regularity. The schools had intellectualised that intuition about the ordinarieness of the world and by the end of the century such learning was beginning to shape the thought of many churchmen who wrote away from the speculative coalfaces about history, geography and nature. Our school-trained seculars all engaged with this idea even if they disliked it: from John of Salisbury and Walter Map who were cautious about the wisdom of the world, to Gerald who embraced it falteringly and to Gervase who was more of an enthusiast. The signs of this thinking are strongest in such texts associated with the court and school room precisely because they were created amongst and for 'worldly' audiences. John and Walter, in their different ways, attacked the terrestrial preoccupations of these men and the store they set by worldly knowledge. Gervase, more radically, seized on this worldliness and made it work for him, subverting

⁹⁶ GT, pp. 742–3. ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 722–3. ⁹⁸ *Ibid.* ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 742–3. ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ And similarly, he endorsed the reality of witchcraft, rehearsing the belief that words can have the power to bewitch, *ibid.*, pp. 714–15.

assumptions about the ordinary world by conjuring up the mysteries that remained.

In one way this rehabilitation of the fruits of experience offered an opportunity. It allowed a partial 'resacralisation' of the world in which a spreading ordinariness risked subsuming all in the mundane. Wonders were sought out for the sake of their wondrousness. They were held up by Gervase for inspection by his audience, the many apparent anomalies being contrasted with the regular patterns of experience. Thus the residual mysteriousness of the created order could be mobilised in a new way, tapping into old emotions of awe and wonder exploited by the teaching church since the conversions. But once accepted and recorded, wonders then demanded theological rationalisation. Here lay danger. Unattended and unexplained, their supernatural ambiguity might threaten that moral universe which failed properly to contain or explain the wondrous. Ambiguous wonders forced reflection on the cosmological order which sustained them and theological axioms long accepted on faith.

Monika Otter has observed this problem through a literary lens. Noting that the critic John Ward had seen 'rhetorical history' in the twelfth century working 'to close out doubt and encourage certainty', she has argued contrarily that historical writers from William of Malmesbury to William of Newburgh and even Walter Map were engaging in freer play with their material.¹⁰² She detected not the certainty Ward had found but 'the quiet assurance of a religious referentiality slipping away' and argued that in the chronicles 'the unifying voice of doctrine often seems inaccessible or elusive'.¹⁰³ Ultimately the twelfth-century historians were marooned but 'in that space between referentialities which they found themselves in as a result, there arises "freedom" (although they probably experienced it as insecurity or loss of certainty)'.¹⁰⁴

Yet, if we historicise this theory, there is a sense in which both Otter and Ward have it partly right. William of Malmesbury functioned in a very different cultural context from William of Newburgh. His history may indeed have functioned to 'close out' doubt, for he told his wonder tales with considerably more self-assurance than his late twelfth-century namesake. Colourful and fresh the marvellous matter of the *Gesta Regum* might be, but its theology, meaning and morality were usually clear-cut. The witch of Berkeley may have astonished readers but the reasons for her destruction, body and soul, held no surprises. Malmesbury had no need to

¹⁰² Otter, *Inventiones*, p. 94; J. O. Ward, 'Some Principles of Rhetorical Historiography in the Twelfth Century', in E. Breisach (ed.), *Classical Rhetoric and Medieval Historiography* (Kalamazoo, 1985), pp. 103–65 at pp. 147–8.

¹⁰³ Otter, *Inventiones*, p. 94. ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 94–5.

spill oceans of ink on testimony here because the issue of the story's historical truthfulness, which Malmesbury never really bothered to tackle, was swallowed in its moral and theological value which revelation and tradition made unassailable. In the writings of William of Newburgh, Gerald of Wales and Ralph of Coggeshall, wonder stories have a different texture. Here historical status mattered very much precisely because their theological and moral meaning was so very opaque. These narratives lay outside theological frames of reference but conformed to standards of historical truthfulness, leaving them suspended uncertainly in the text. The textual spaces in which they appeared themselves reflected their indeterminacy. They were recorded in margins, in separate blocks within the narrative acknowledged as digressions and deviations, or else in new genres where the rules of authorial engagement were still fluid and audience expectations unfixed. These were stories outside the rules.

It is also no accident that accounts compounding wonderment, reliable testimony, moral ambiguity and lasting physical evidence proved the deepest and most intractable of mysteries for the chroniclers. These could not so easily be dismissed as the product of human imagination. Nor could they be written off as demonic illusions because, where black magic and the works of evil angels were held by conventional demonology to be transitory, these wonders endured in at least some of their effects. William of Newburgh was especially alarmed by this – wondering how one of the green children had married into human society if this story was just a product of delusions wrought by demons.¹⁰⁵ Even Map worried about it. What, he asked, are we to make of the ‘cases of fantasy (*fantasia*) which endure?’¹⁰⁶ What was to be done about fairy unions with mortal men which yielded offspring who went on to lead lives of valour or holiness? He had no answer but to point his reader away from such imponderables to ‘revealed’ things which they could know for sure. Green children and fairy progeny alarmed so much because in them the contrary witness of human experience and established theology collided most spectacularly, shaking the explanatory system which theology offered and ultimately escaping the moral universe it had established.

¹⁰⁵ WN, I, p. 87. ¹⁰⁶ Map, pp. 160–1.

CONCLUSION

The twelfth century witnessed the transformation of historical writing as new genres emerged and old ones evolved under the influence of new theological and philosophical approaches to explanation. The histories written by monks in the earlier twelfth century, of which Orderic's monumental work stands as an example, tended to be morality-infused: the cosmos and human experience were textured by the working of divine will such that history and nature functioned as illuminations of scripture. And yet we need to remember that the description of the past conceived by Orderic was to some extent a didactic account of human experience. It taught that men and women inhabited a moral universe and that history was divinely ordered and wonder-rich. This argument had to be made against a contrary view, formed by experience, which said that wonders were rare and lacked the pattern and purpose that Orderic ascribed to them. We can detect this alternative even in Orderic's own accumulation of extra evidence for wondrous things. This seemed to anticipate the objection of some in his audience that no one had seen such marvels. A similar scepticism is present in William of Malmesbury's story of the fall of the tower over Rufus's grave, where the author manoeuvred to escape mockery for credulously assuming that the collapse was a sign. Here an intellectual system which relied on divine providence as the prevailing means of explanation was challenged by the strong, if still unformed, apprehension that the world was not so coherent or regulated in such intimate detail by its creator.

The great change under way in the twelfth century was that this instinct was steadily given an intellectual shape by a new generation of churchmen associated chiefly with the schools. As we have seen, their ideas of a regular natural order susceptible to explanation through reason obliged them to weather a storm of criticism from others, especially certain Cistercian thinkers, who saw this natural philosophy as an assault on the primacy of scripture. The vehemence of that counter-attack was

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about more than the timeless bitterness of academic debate. The schoolmen were giving intellectual respectability to ways of thinking which the Cistercians had set out to abandon as they retreated from the world and looked inwards to scripture for answers. The battle that raged between men such as William of Conches and William of St Thierry did not end in the middle years of the twelfth century but rather became internalised in their intellectual heirs, men trained in the schools in the second half of that century who found themselves the inheritors of both traditions. Thus Gerald of Wales and Gervase of Tilbury sought to reconcile the evidence of the eyes with the witness of scripture and struggled also with the different approaches to knowledge which the arguments of schoolmen and Cistercians had earlier thrown into sharp relief.

The effects of this were profound. Nature's essential regularity, an intuition which might, as Augustine argued, emerge from experience, was acquiring an intellectual justification in the minds of some churchmen. At the same time the search for the causes of things in nature rather than in God made the creator seem more distant from his creation. The effect of these tendencies was to make miracles seem rarer and to ensure that those which persisted stood out more starkly and were invested with greater significance. This gave rise to a further difficulty. Observation and testimony seemed to produce a category of events which conformed to the criteria for miracle in their oddness and inexplicability but fell short because of their moral ambiguity. The examination of nature thus, in a further sense, threatened the idea of a meaning-rich and providentially ordered universe.

This helps to explain why ambiguous wonder stories – of green children, fairies, wild men, revenants and fantastical spirits – began to invade the writings of twelfth-century churchmen. They constituted potentially valuable evidence of the wondrous but their status as genuine or counterfeit miracles, proceeding ultimately from God or the Devil, was subject to intense doubt. Worse, their ambiguity was still more threatening in some instances because the events or beings described seemed to escape traditional moral and theological frameworks altogether. This powerful combination explains why so many chroniclers discussed the wondrous but pushed it to the edges of their writing – into digressive sections fenced off from the main text, added at the end or into the margins. In the intellectual spaces created by such strategies interpretations could be tested but final explanation could be postponed and the business of locating a story, event or belief in the sacred scheme could be deferred. For authors, especially those seculars closer to the intellectual cutting edge, the fascination of (and anxiety about) ambiguous wonder seems to have been even stronger, coming to lie in precisely that tension

between the way scripture suggested the world should be and the way it seemed to emerge through the senses, in the apparent authenticity of experiences which defied theological explanation.

These intellectual impulses to preserve and explain accounts of the ambiguous supernatural reinforced an existing predisposition among many churchmen to tolerate or accept them. Among churchmen at or near the pastoral coalface, green children, wild men, fairies and ambiguous spirits might be able to co-exist with the basic teachings of the church which all were obliged to accept, filling the interstices of that skeleton of beliefs and practices because they did not pose a challenge. If the stern penitentials implicitly indulged such beliefs by imposing only light penances on those who told stories about fauns, fairies and spirits, churchmen obliged to apply such principles in practice might be still more forgiving. It was thus not only intellectual proclivities but perhaps also pastoral pragmatism which made Gerald of Wales tolerant of sooth-saying, divination, informal penitential rituals and stories about fairies and spirits even as he condemned simony, concubinage and lay ownership of churches. Gerald, in his profuse writings, offers exceptionally rich insights but there is no reason to consider his pastoral approach exceptional. Similar tendencies towards accommodation are to be found more generally within the church.

Parish Christianity, as it was evolving in the twelfth century, had two key characteristics which encouraged this propensity. First, I have already observed that we should see religion in its parochial setting as a blend of local and universal belief and practice. Here the universal was constituted not only by elements such as shared liturgies, rites of passage, sacraments and conceptualisations of sacred time but also by beliefs about miracles, signs and evil spirits shared by all, or almost all. These helped in turn to sustain socially valuable practices, especially apotropaic measures and ritualised invocations of the saints, in which participation also appears to have been general. It is, of course, true that these beliefs, and the practices they nourished, were articulated in different ways, differences implicit in discrepant views of divine providence, precatory or mechanistic interpretation of apotropaic measures and friction between wonder-seeking and soul-saving valuations of the holy. But the central point here is that these tensions *did* usually remain implicit. There was, in other words, enough acceptance of diversity, especially among churchmen charged with the care of the parishes, for buried tensions in the belief system not ordinarily to erupt in crises.

This is not, however, to bathe the parishes in a roseate glow of consensual religion. There were hard reasons for this culture of accommodation. This brings me to a second point about parochial Christianity.

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We must not lose sight of the great influence possessed by those nameless ordinary believers in the evolving parishes. They had built and rebuilt many of the churches, frequently produced the priests from among their ranks and resourced the emerging parishes not simply through tithes and obligatory dues but also by a host of voluntary contributions. What is visible to us in the sticks and stones of buildings and traces of who served as local priests was most probably reflected more generally in the culture of the parish as well. Despite the uncompromising tone of much normative writing, the realities of local power created parochial frameworks within which accommodation between worshipping community and the church's representatives was unavoidable. The strong elements of consensus in twelfth-century religious culture thus had origins in both these power relations and in beliefs about the supernatural which were, paradoxically, both generally shared and innately flexible.

Subtler forces were also working in the same direction as these two tendencies. Accommodation was also probably motivated by complicated and often ambivalent feelings among the clergy themselves. We have already seen that, even as the church tended, in formal statements, to set itself against the quest for knowledge of the future, many individual churchmen dabbled in astrology, divination and worldly prophecy. Some, so it was feared, might meddle with magical uses of the sacraments in efforts to see off worldly troubles or realise ambitions. Others were deeply involved in unofficial rituals ranging from penitential dancing to propitiatory sacrifice. The values of a universal church might thus be tempered and applied selectively by churchmen because their own cultural formation was complex. Churchmen inevitably started their lives in lay communities and this element of their experience was reflected in their writings. Some told stories remembered from a time before entering the church, perhaps heard as a child at their mother's knee or as a young man among kin or neighbours in their village. This was not a world in which churchmen were in any sense sealed off from lay culture or necessarily hostile to it: even the austere oblate Orderic remembered a world before the cloister and continued to be connected to it after his profession, through his travels around St Évrout. In consequence, the writers we have met carried with them not only the values of the church in which they had found a vocation but also, to a greater or lesser extent, those of the families and wider communities from which they were drawn.

It is a commonplace of the historiography of thirteenth-century religion that this world would be transformed by the enterprise of school-trained churchmen eager to universalise religious experience and by the friars who provided evangelical shock troops for the cause. That the

religious world we have been in the business of describing was remade in the thirteenth century is beyond dispute and yet we must be cautious about how this came about. The key point here is that reformers were obliged to persuade for they could not compel. Invisible in its local details, and urgently in need of further research, the general shape of the bargain they sought to strike with the ordinary believer is nonetheless discernible. For the price of tighter local discipline, these churchmen sold a promise, offering to the parishioner a religious vocation (and a way to salvation) which might realistically be lived in the world. They constructed a regimen centred on sacraments, in particular the regular disciplines of confession and communion highlighted in the Fourth Lateran Council and the defining lay sacrament of marriage, which offered appropriate remedies for sinfulness. They also accepted that the inevitable imperfection of lay lives precluded proper amendment for sin and so they altered the old stress on full discharge of debts in this world through penance. Now they privileged contrition as the way to open the wells of grace and emphasised satisfaction after death, in more clearly conceptualised purgatorial fires, as a means of post-mortem amendment.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that this practical theology had been neatly designed by the end of the twelfth century and that it remained simply to broadcast it in the world. Much was still undeveloped, fluid and, in the broadest sense of the word, negotiable. For example, although the sacraments may have acquired a sharp identity and theological rationale by the close of the twelfth century, the theology of sacramentals lacked any such precision. The idea of measures which worked *ex opere operantis*, part of the standard mental equipment of educated late medieval churchmen, was not typically the property of learned chroniclers or hagiographers even at the end of our period. They may have agreed about the ritual means by which supernatural aid might be sought but the inner mechanisms which delivered it eluded consensus. Some made apotropaic practices in essence precatory. Others betrayed understandings in which words and gestures and holy things seemed to have automatic effects. A few even appealed to the intrinsic or hidden properties which God had invested in certain created things in such a way that they could be used as remedies against evil.

Something as fundamental as the church's official account of the soul's journey was also inchoate, despite the slow crystallising of its formal teachings about purgatorial punishment and the world beyond the grave. The relationship between individual judgement at death and general judgement at the end of time was not, at the end of the twelfth century, yet worked out; purgatory itself, as a single space rather than a diversity of locations and conditions, would also have to wait until the

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later thirteenth century for its papal *imprimatur*. This idea, seemingly central to the late medieval cult of the dead, was still being ‘designed’, even as elements of new teaching about the fate of souls were disseminated in society at large by preachers. This lack of fixity in many areas of the church’s teaching ensured that the forms some teachings took might be determined not only by the reflection of theologians and the aims of preachers but also by the demands of communities in which ideas were being disseminated.

If we look forward into the thirteenth century, compromise might be visible not only in the messages of the reformers but also in the media with which they were obliged to convey them. This could have unpredictable effects on the way doctrine came to be imagined and understood. Making abstruse theology generally accessible in sermon, *exemplum* and didactic image depended on the co-option of worldly discourses, the use of analogies from law, from literate culture and from everyday commercial exchange. Thus the *lingua franca* of the market-place became a means to make the mysterious journey of the soul through the otherworld real in the mind’s eye. Sins might be weighed in scales and accounted on balance sheets while good works accumulated in heaven like coins in a chest. All could be reduced to arithmetical proportions made familiar by the engagement of an ever-greater fraction of the population in a commercialised and monetised economy. This might produce not a deliberate compromise but an unintended one with far-reaching consequences. Such vivid images spread the church’s official message far and wide but they did so in the terms, and also to some extent on the terms, of the audience. The preacher’s triumph also guaranteed that the worldly language of the market infused thinking about the otherworld for the rest of the middle ages. Sins and suffrages were reckoned in mercantilist terms and the medium had, in subtle but important ways, transmuted the messages it was intended to convey.

Teaching eschatology in the parishes would also depend on another accommodation of the church to the values of the world. Preaching depended not just upon the language of everyday experience but also upon approaches to knowledge which experience of the world had taught. The teaching church of the thirteenth century reconciled itself to the hard realities of a seeing-is-believing culture. It did not, arguably could not, rely for general acceptance of its interpretation of the afterlife on faith alone. It drew also on vivid narratives which supplied empirical evidence of signs, ghosts, visions and miracles. Gervase of Tilbury was in exactly this business, stressing that the ghosts and visions he described would rebut scepticism about the otherworld among those who tended to believe only what they had seen and touched. Others would engage in

something rather similar for less exalted audiences than the German imperial court when they compiled *exempla* for use in the parishes. The profusion of these from the thirteenth century onwards saw demons, angels and saints co-opted into didactic narratives, not only to spice them up but also to give them a firm basis in reported fact. It saw preachers working with the grain of local imaginative worlds, drawing in stories they found in communities and making them grist to their pedagogical mills. Once again there was inevitable compromise, as stories and values from the world, from local cultures, were imported into the didactic productions of the church.

The thirteenth century would also see the church continuing to adjust to cultural changes which were not of its purposeful creation. As speculative reason had ramifications for the ways in which the world was described and analysed, so developments in 'practical' reason, in such rising disciplines as law, medicine and astrology, presented individual churchmen and groups within the church with both opportunities and challenges. Law, medicine and astrology each offered a version of the same essential promise: that a measure of control over worldly perils could be exerted through the exercise of a trained mind. Lives and livelihoods might be protected, illnesses might be cured, the course of the future might be mapped out. Just as speculative reason intellectualised the regularities observable in the world, such forms of applied reason tried to make the world more regular, giving experience pattern and predictability through the practice of specialised learning.

These cultural changes entailed adjustments to the explanatory strategies used by ecclesiastical writers. The Anselmian division of causes sketched at the start of the twelfth century still held at its end: there was consensus that these were divided into things brought about by God, things produced by God through nature and things effected by human (or animal) agency. But the exercise of speculative and applied reason was probably enlarging the second and third categories at the expense of the first. This is not to argue for some simple rolling back of miraculous explanation, for a straightforward process of 'de-supernaturalisation' or for an unexpectedly early beginning to the world's 'disenchantment'. The shifts in the central middle ages were much more complicated than this. We have already seen how the exercise of speculative reason reached its limits in the writings of Gerald of Wales and, to some degree, those of William of Newburgh. Both encountered things they could not account for by naturalising means and so retreated from such explanations. This sharpened the awareness of inexplicable anomalies, of what could and could not be known, pushing Gerald in particular back into more traditional Augustinian conceptualisations of the world.

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We should also note that the advance of applied reason might meet resistance. It was vulnerable to a pincer movement, trapped between moral disapprobation and empirical counter-attack. The astrologer might be criticised for the distrust of divine providence implied by his starcraft and the consequent need to leave the future to God alone. But equally his claims could be disputed because he frequently got predictions wrong. The physician's art, and its promise of worldly aid, also presented the polemicist for saints' shrines with an easy target because failed cures could be held up for ridicule. At the same time, a moral argument might be mobilised: that the sick might be distracted from preparing their souls for death by the search for terrestrial healing. Such criticisms, which were well rehearsed by the end of the twelfth century, would also acquire some new reinforcement in the later middle ages because the theory underpinning Christian wonder-working was worked out more tightly and in such a way as to bring the practice of apotropaic rituals and the workings of providence into a more coherent relationship. The theology of sacramentals explained why apotropaic measures might fail by offering a more systematic account of how human action and grace co-operated in such remedies. The refinement of this argument offered Christian wonder-working a better defence against the sorts of empirical attacks which regularly dented the credibility of rivals such as the physician and the astrologer whose claims depended more exclusively on terrestrial wisdom.

De-supernaturalising tendencies might also be counteracted by other developments. The supernatural order was frequently able to infiltrate structures created by practical reason. This is discernible in the legal sphere. As the king's law acquired increased importance in the defence of landed interests during the second half of the twelfth century, supernatural defences against enemies did not yield to human agency. We can see this in hagiographies and miracle collections. These had once portrayed patron saints smiting marauding vikings, striking down brigands and menacing predatory neighbours. Now the religious of communities in which the saints resided might enthusiastically take up pen and parchment and use their wits to exploit the legal system but they continued to mobilise supernatural weapons as well. Colourful miracle-narratives warned off the would-be litigant by advertising how saints might, in vivid apparitions, frighten the king's justices into the favourable determination of a case or terrorise litigious enemies into abandoning their claims. Saints did not disappear from the defence of monastic interests but rather re-penetrated evolving systems of law, finding new ways of haunting within them.

Thus the 'rise' of practical reason, just like the rise of speculative reason, did not roll the supernatural back in a straightforward fashion but rather

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created new contexts in which it was obliged to work. Paradoxically, these processes also sharpened an awareness of supernatural anomalies which defied the ordered patterns which speculative reason had elucidated in nature and applied reason had helped to fashion in human society. These anomalies were held up by Gervase, and by many *exempla*-authors who followed him, as further evidence of the essential wondrousness of the world. They were impelled to do this not just by the persistence of wonders in a more regular universe but also by the need to preach and teach in the world. The pastoral agenda of the church, the need to re-evangelise, made wonders grist to the teacher's mill, encouraging the preacher to use them as a revelation of the invisible order, a means to communicate moral messages, an antidote to the ordinariness of the world.

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